ASKEW'S VICTORY

HAROLD BINDLOSS

"'Why don't you look before you shoot,' shouted Kit."
(Chapter XI.)

Askew's Victory] [*Frontispiece*

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BY

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ASKEW'S VICTORY

PART I.—AT ASHNESS

CHAPTER I

THE LEASE

THE morning was bright after heavy rain, and when Osborn looked out of the library window a warm, south-west breeze shook the larches about Tarnside Hall. Now and then a shadow sped across the tarn, darkening the ripples that sparkled like silver when the cloud drove on. Osborn frowned, for he had meant to go fishing and it was a morning when the big, shy trout would rise. His gamekeeper was waiting at the boathouse, but the postman had brought some letters that made him put off his sport.

This was annoying, because Osborn hated to be baulked and seldom allowed anything to interfere with his amusements. One letter, from a house-master at a famous public school, covered a number of bills, which, the writer stated somewhat curtly, ought to have been paid. Another announced that Hayes, the agent for the estate, and a tenant would wait upon Osborn, who knew what they meant to talk about. He admitted that a landlord had duties, but his generally demanded attention at an inconvenient time.

Osborn was fifty years of age. He had a ruddy skin and well proportioned figure, and was, physically, a rather fine example of the sporting country gentleman. For all that, there were lines on his forehead and wrinkles about

his eyes; his mouth was loose, and something about him hinted an indulgence. His manner, as a rule, was abrupt and often overbearing.

The library was spacious, the furniture in good taste but getting shabby. In fact, a certain look of age and shabbiness was typical of the house. Although the windows were open, the room had a damp smell, and the rows of books that Osborn never read were touched with mildew. Rain was plentiful in the north-country dale, coal was dear, and Mrs. Osborn was forced to study economy, partly because her husband would not.

By and by Osborn turned his glance from the window and fixed it on his son, who stood waiting across the big oak table. Gerald was a handsome lad, like his father, but marked by a certain refinement and a hint of delicacy. Although he felt anxious, his pose was free and graceful and his look undisturbed. Osborn threw the bills on the table.

"This kind of thing must stop," he said. "I haven't grumbled much, perhaps not as much as I ought, about your extravagance, but only a fool imagines he can spend more than he has got."

"We have had such fools in our family," the boy remarked, and stopped when he saw Osborn's colour rise.

"It's a pity it's true," the latter agreed, with a patience he did not often use. "I'm paying for it now and you will pay a higher price, if you go on as you promise. You must pull up; I've done enough and am getting tired of self-denial."

Gerald's smile faded. He had inherited his extravagance from his father, but felt he must be cautious, although Osborn sometimes showed him a forbearance he used to nobody else.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said. "Perhaps I was extravagant, but if you don't want to be an outsider, you must do like the rest, and I understood you expected me to make friends among our own set. We can't be shabby."

He struck the right note, for Osborn was not clever and perhaps his strongest characteristic was his exaggerated family pride.

"You had enough and I paid your debts not long since,"

he said. "In fact, you have had more than your share, with the consequence that Grace gets less than hers." He knitted his brows as he indicated the house-master's letter. "Then, you have given a stranger an opportunity for writing to me like this."

Gerald, knowing his father's humour, saw he was getting on dangerous ground.

"Brown's a dry old prig, sir. Nothing sporting about him; he's hardly a gentleman."

Osborn was seldom logical and now his annoyance was rather concentrated on the master who had written to him with jarring frankness than on the extravagant lad.

"His letter implies it," he agreed and then pulled himself up. Gerald was clever and no doubt meant to divert his thoughts. "After all, this doesn't matter," he went on. "I'll pay these bills, but if you get into debt at Woolwich, you had better not come home. I have enough trouble about money, and your allowance is going to be a strain. There's another thing; Carter, who hasn't had your advantages, got in as a prize cadet."

Gerald smiled. "He hasn't got his commission. Old Harry means well, but he's not our sort, and these plodding, cramming fellows seldom make good officers."

"An officer must pay his mess bills, whether he's good or bad," Osborn rejoined. "If you go into the Horse Artillery, there won't be much money left when you have settled yours, so it might be prudent to begin some self-denial now. Anyhow, if you get into debt again, you know the consequences."

He raised his hand in dismissal and walked to the window when the lad went out. He had not taken the line he meant to take, but Gerald often, so to speak, eluded him. The lad had a way of hinting that they understood one another and Osborn vaguely suspected that he worked upon his prejudices; but he was a sportsman. He had pluck and knew what the Osborn traditions demanded. In fact, Gerald might go far, if he went straight.

Then Osborn thought he needed a drink, and after ringing a bell he sat down by the window with the tray and glass a servant brought. It was significant that he had

given no order; the servants knew what the bell meant. When he had drained the glass he vacantly looked out. Boggy pasture and stony cornfields ran back from the tarn. Here and there a white farmstead, surrounded by stunted trees, stood at the hillfoot; farther back a waterfall seamed the rocks and yellow grass with threads of foam; and then a lofty moor, red with heather, shut off the view.

The land was poor at the dale-head, but there was better below, where the hills dropped down to the flat country, and, with the exception of Ashness farm, all was Osborn's, from Force Crag, where the beck plunged from the moor, to the rich bottoms round Allerby mill. Unfortunately, the estate was encumbered when he inherited it, and he had paid off one mortgage by raising another. He might perhaps have used other means, letting his sporting rights and using economy, but this would have jarred. The only Osborn who bothered about money was his wife, and Alice was parsimonious enough for both. Money was certainly what his agent called tight; but as long as he could give his friends some shooting and a good dinner and live as an Osborn ought to live, he was satisfied. Still, Gerald must have his chance at Woolwich and this needed thought. Osborn felt he would like another drink, but glanced at his watch and saw that his visitors would arrive in a few minutes.

They were punctual and Osborn got up when his agent and another man came in. Hayes was tall, urbane, and dressed with rather fastidious neatness; Bell was round-shouldered and shabby. He had a weather-beaten skin, grey hair, and small, cunning eyes. Osborn indicated chairs and sat down at the top of the big table. He disliked business and knew the others meant to persuade him to do something he would sooner leave alone. This would have been impossible had he not needed money.

"Mr. Bell wishes to know if his tender for the Slate Company's haulage is approved," Hayes began. "His traction engine is suited for the work and he is prepared to buy a trailer lurry, which we would find useful in the dale. Mechanical transport would be a public advantage on our hilly roads."

" It needs a good horse to bring half a load from station," Bell interposed. " T' lurry would move as much in yan day as farmers' carts in four."

Osborn agreed. He was not much of an economist, but it was obvious that time and labour were wasted when a farmer took a few sacks of potatoes to the railway and another sack of wool. There was no difficulty about the tender, because Osborn was chairman of the small Slate Company ; the trouble was that the contract would help Bell to carry out another plan. The fellow was greedy, and was getting a rather dangerous control ; he had already a lease of the limekilns and Allerby mill. But his rents were regularly paid, and it was an advantage to deal with one prosperous tenant instead of several who had not his punctuality and capital.

" The trailer would be useful if you decided to make the new terrace you thought about," Hayes suggested. " The cost of carting the gravel and the slabs for the wall would be heavy ; but I have no doubt Mr. Bell would undertake the work with the trailer on very reasonable terms."

" I might forget to send in t' bill. Yan good turn deserves another," Bell remarked.

Hayes frowned. He had meant to imply something like this, but Bell was too blunt. For all that, Osborn was not very fastidious and had long meant to make the terrace when funds permitted. In fact, he hardly saw the thing as a bribe ; it was rather a graceful recognition of his authority.

" Very well," he said, " I'll sign the contract."

" There is another matter," Hayes resumed. " Mr. Bell is willing to take up Harkness' tenancy of the coal yard and seed store at the station. He hopes you will grant him a long lease."

Osborn pondered. Harkness had been drunken, careless, and often behind with his rent. He had let his business fall away and it was understood that Bell, who managed the opposition coal yard, had lent him small sums and until recently kept him on his feet. This was not because Bell was charitable, but because if Harkness came down while he had any trade left, a capable rival might take his place.

In the meantime, his customers gradually went to Bell, and now Harkness had failed there was no business to attract a newcomer.

"I don't know," said Osborn, "I had thought of advertising the yard and store."

"You'll get nobody to pay what I'm offering," Bell replied. "A stranger would want to see Harkness' books and there's nowt in them as would tempt him to pay a decent rent. Then, with trailer going back from station, I could beat him on the haulage up the dale. He'd niver get his money back if he bowt an engine like mine."

This was plausible, but Osborn hesitated. He saw that Bell wanted a monopoly and had a vague notion that he ought to protect his tenants.

"It's sometimes an advantage to have two traders in a place," he remarked. "A certain amount of competition is healthy."

"I don't know if it would be an advantage to the estate, and imagine you would not get a tenant to pay what Bell offers," Hayes replied. "Besides, rival traders sometimes agree to keep up prices, and competition does not always make things cheap."

"That's one of the ridiculous arguments people who want the Government to manage everything sometimes use," said Osborn with a scornful gesture.

Hayes smiled. "It is very well known that I am not an advocate of State ownership. All the same, unnecessary competition would be wasteful in the dale. For example, if you have two tenants at the station, the farmers who deal with the new man must use their cars, each coming separately for the small load a horse can take up Redmire bank, while Bell's trailer, after bringing down the slate, would go back empty. Then I hear some talk about a fresh appeal to the council to make the loop road round the hill."

For a moment or two Osborn did not answer. Redmire bank was an obstacle to horse traffic, and the road surveyor had plans for easing the gradient that would necessitate cutting down a wood where Osborn's pheasants found shelter. He had refused permission, and the matter had been dropped; but, if the farmers insisted, the council

might be forced to use their powers. He was obstinate, and did not mean to let them have the wood unless he could get his price.

"You know my opinion about that?" he said.

"Yes," said Hayes; "I imagine it would be prudent not to have the matter brought up. However, if Bell can send back his lurry full, the economy is plain. It will enable him to sell his coal and seed at a moderate price and pay a higher rent."

"That is so," Osborn agreed, and knitted his brows.

He doubted if Bell would give his customers the benefit of the cheaper haulage, but the advantage of getting a higher rent was obvious. Osborn knew he was being persuaded to do a shabby thing and hesitated. Money, however, was needed and must be got.

"Very well," he said, "Mr. Bell can have the lease."

They talked about something else, and when Osborn went fishing after the others left the wind had dropped, the sun was very bright, and the trout would not rise. He felt rather injured, because he had paid for his attention to duty, when he joined his wife and daughter at tea on the lawn.

A copper beech threw a cool shadow across the small table and basket chairs; the china and silver were old and good. Beyond the belt of wavering shade, the recently mown grass gave out a moist smell in the hot sun.

Across the yew hedge, the tarn sparkled like a mirror and on its farther side, where a clump of dark pines overhung a beach of silver sand, the hillslopes shone with yellow grass, relieved by the green of fern and belts of moss. Osborn was proud of Tarnside, although he sometimes chafed because he had not enough money to care for it as he ought.

By and by he glanced at his wife, who had silently filled the cups and was cutting cake. She was a thin, quiet woman, with a hint of reserve in her delicately moulded face. Sometimes she tactfully exercised a restraining influence, but for the most part acquiesced, for she had found out, soon after her marriage, that her husband must not be opposed.

Grace, who sat opposite, had recently come home from

school, and was marked by an independence somewhat unusual at Tarnside. She argued with Osborn and was firm when he got angry. Then she had a fresh enthusiasm for change and improvement and a generous faith in what she thought was good. Since Osborn was obstinately conventional, this sometimes led to jars.

"After all, I'm going to have the terrace made," he remarked and waited for his wife's approval.

"Is it prudent?" she asked hesitatingly. "If I remember, you thought the work would cost too much when we talked about it last."

"It will cost very little. In fact, I imagine the haulage of the gravel and the slabs for the wall will cost nothing," Osborn replied. "Bell has promised to bring me all the stuff we'll need with his new trailer."

"Oh," said Grace, rather sharply, "I suppose this means you have given him the lease to the station coal yard? No doubt he offered to bring the gravel before you agreed. He's cunning and knew you wanted the terrace."

"I can't remember if he offered before or afterwards," Osborn replied.

Grace pondered. She was intelligent; contact with her school companions had developed her character, and she had begun to understand Osborn since she came home. She knew he was easily deceived and sometimes half-consciously deceived himself.

"No," she said, "I don't think the work will really be cheap. It's often expensive to take a favour from a man like Bell. He will find a means of making you pay."

"Ridiculous! Bell can't make me pay."

"Then he will make somebody else pay for what he does for you, and it's hardly honest to let him," Grace insisted.

Mrs. Osborn gave her a warning glance and Osborn's face got red.

"I'm sorry," Grace said quietly, but with a hint of resolution. "I don't want to criticise, but Bell is greedy and cunning, and now he has got both coal yards will charge the farmers more than he ought. He has already got too large a share of all the business that is done in the dale."

"It's obvious that you have learned less than you think,"

Osborn rejoined, feeling that he was on safer ground. "You don't seem to understand that concentration means economy. Bell, for example, buys and stores his goods in large quantities, instead of handling a number of small lots at different times, which would cost him more."

"I can see that," Grace admitted. "But I imagine he will keep all he saves. You know the farmers are grumbling about his charges."

Osborn frowned. "You talk too much to the farm people; I don't like it. You can be polite, but I want you to remember they are my tenants, and not to sympathise with their imaginary grievances. They're a grumbling lot, but will keep their places if you leave them alone."

He got up abruptly, and when he went off across the lawn Mrs. Osborn gave the girl a reproachful look.

"You are very rash, my dear. On the whole, your father was remarkably patient."

Grace laughed, a rather strained laugh, as Osborn's angry voice rose from behind a shrubbery.

"He isn't patient now, and I'm afraid Jackson is paying for my fault. However, I really think I was patient, too. To talk about people keeping their places is ridiculous; in fact, it's piffle! Father's notions are horribly out of date. One wonders he doesn't know."

Grace was romantic and generous, and had learned something about social economy at the famous school; in fact, Osborn would have been startled had he suspected how much she knew. Neverthless, she was young; her studies were half digested, and her theories crude. She had come home with a vague notion of playing the part of Lady Bountiful and putting things right, but had got a jar soon after she began. Her father's idea of justice was elementary; he resented her meddling, and was sometimes tyrannical. When it was obvious that he had taken an improper line he blamed his agent; but perhaps the worst was he seldom knew when he was wrong. Then the agent's main object was to extort as much money from the tenants as possible.

CHAPTER II

THE OTTER HOUNDS

GRACE'S tweed dress was wet and rather muddy when she stood with Gerald on a gravel bank at the head of a pool, where the beck from the tarn joined a larger stream that flowed through a neighbouring dale. There had been some rain and the water was stained a warm claret-colour by the peat. Bright sunshine pierced the tossing alder banches, and the rapid close by sparkled between belts of moving shade. Large white dogs with black and yellow spots swam uncertainly about the pool and searched the bank ; a group of men stood in the rapid, while another group watched the tail of the pool. Somewhere between them a hard-pressed otter hid.

A few of the men wore red coats and belonged to the hunt ; the rest were shepherds and farmers whom custom entitled to join in the sport. All carried long iron-pointed poles and waited with keen expectation the reappearance of the otter. Grace was perhaps the only one to feel a touch of pity for the exhausted animal and she wondered whether this was not a sentimental weakness. There was not much to be said for the otter's right to live ; it was stealthy, cruel, and horribly destructive, killing many more fish and moorhens than it could eat. Indeed, before she went to school, she had followed the hunt with pleasant excitement, and was now rather surprised to find the sport had lost its zest.

Thorn, the master of the hounds, was talking to his huntsman not far off. He was a friend of Osborn's, and Grace had once thought him a dashing and accomplished man of the world, but had recently, for no very obvious reason, felt antagonistic. Alan was not as clever as she had imagined ; he was smart, sometimes cheaply smart, which was another thing.

For a few moments Grace let her eyes wander up the dale to the crags where the force leaped down from the red moor at Malton Head. Belts of dry bent grass shone like gold

and mossy patches glimmered luminously green. The fall looked like white lace drawn across the stones. A streak of mist touched the lofty crag, and above it a soft white cloud trailed across the sky. Then she turned as her brother spoke.

"Alan has given us a good hunt and means to make a kill. He's rather a selfish beast and a bit too sure of himself; but he runs the pack well and knows how to get the best out of life. No Woolwich and sweating as a snubbed subaltern for him! He stopped at home, saw his tenants farmed well, and shot his game. That's my notion of a country gentleman!"

"Father can look after Tarnside and a duty goes with owning land," Grace remarked. "A landlord who need not work ought to serve the State. That idea was perhaps the best thing in the feudal system and it's not altogether forgotten yet. Father was right when he decided to make you a soldier."

"He can send me to Woolwich, but after all that's as far as he can go. You're not at your best when you're improving," Gerald rejoined; and added with a grin, "You don't like old Alan, do you? I thought you snubbed him half an hour since."

Grace coloured, but did not answer. She had hurt her foot by falling from a mossy boulder and Thorn had come to help as she floundered across a shallow pool. She was draggled and her hair was loose, and Thorn's faint amusement annoyed her. Somehow it hinted at familiarity. She would not have resented it once, for they had been friends; but when she came home and he had tried to renew the friendship she had noted a subtle difference. Alan was forty, but now she had left school the disparity of the ages was, in a sense, much less marked. Then a shout roused her and she looked round.

Where the smooth, brown water ran past the alder roots, a very small, dark object moved in advance of a faint, widening ripple. Grace knew it was the point of the otter's head; the animal's lungs were empty since it stopped up so long. Next moment plunging dogs churned the pool into foam, the object vanished, and men ran along the bank

to the lower rapid, while those already there beat the shallow with their poles. The dogs bunched together and began to swim, up stream ; Gerald and one or two more plunged into the water, and for a few moments the otter showed itself again.

It looked like a fish and not an animal as it broke the surface, rising in graceful leaps. Then it went down, with the dogs swimming hard close behind, and Grace thought it must be caught. It was being steadily driven to the lower end of the stopped rapid, where the water was scarcely a foot deep. The animal reappeared, plunging in and out among the shallows but forging up-stream, and the men who meant to turn it back closed up. There was one at every yard across the belt of sparkling foam. They had spiked poles to beat the water and it seemed impossible that their victim could get past.

Yet the otter vanished, and for a minute or two there was silence, until the dogs rushed up the bank. Then somebody shouted, the huntsman blew his horn, and a small, wedge-shaped ripple trailed, very slowly, across the next pool. The otter had somehow stolen past the watchers' legs and reached deep water, but its slowness told that its strength had gone. The dogs took the water with a splash, and Grace turned her head. She felt pitiful and did not want to see the end. The animal had made a gallant fight, and she shrank from the butchery.

The clatter of heavy boots on stone suddenly stopped ; there was a curious pause, and Grace looked up as somebody shouted : " Gone to holt ! Ca' off your hounds. Wheer's t' terrier ? "

The hunt swept up the bank, smashed through a hedge, and spread along the margin of the neighbouring pool. A few big alders grew beside its edge, sending down their roots into deep water ; but for the most part the bank was supported by timbers driven into the soil, and freshly laid with neatly-bedded turf. Grace knew this had been done to protect the meadow, because the stream is thrown against the concave side when a pool lies in a bend.

As she stopped at the broken hedge a man ran past carrying a small wet terrier, and two or three more came up

with spades. The otter could not escape now, since the hounds would watch the underwater entrance to the cave among the alder roots, while the terrier would crawl down from the other side. If a hole could not be found, the men would dig. They were interrupted soon after they began, for somebody said, "Put down your spade, Tom. Hold the terrier."

Grace studied the man who had interfered. He was young and on the whole attractive. His face was honest and sunburned; he carried himself well, and was dressed rather neatly in knickerbockers and shooting jacket. She knew Christopher Askew was the son of a neighbouring farmer, who owned his land. Then, as the men stopped digging, Thorn pushed past.

"What's this?" he asked haughtily. "Why have you meddled?"

Askew looked hard at him, but answered in a quiet voice, "It cost us some trouble to mend the bank, and if you dig out the otter the stream will soon make an ugly gap."

"Then it's a matter of the cost!" said Thorn. "How much?"

"Not altogether," Askew replied colouring. "It's a matter of the damage the next flood may do. We had an awkward job to strengthen the bank and I'm not going to have it cut."

"Noo, Kit, dinna spoil sport," the old huntsman urged. "It's none a trick for a canny lad to cheat the hounds."

"Put terrier in an' niver mind him!" shouted another, and there were cries of approval.

"Stop digging, Tom," Askew said with quiet firmness. "Pick up the dog."

"We are wasting time," Thorn remarked. "I don't like bargaining; you had better state your price."

"No more do I like bargaining," Askew replied. "There will be no digging here. You have smashed the hedge, and that's enough. Call off your dogs."

"So you mean to spoil sport, even if the damage costs you nothing? I know your kind; it's getting common."

"Oh, no," said Askew. "I won't have the bank cut

down, but that is all. If you like, you can look for another otter on our part of the stream."

Thorn gave him a searching glance, and then, seeing he was resolute, shrugged contemptuously. The huntsman blew his horn, the dogs were drawn off, and Gerald followed the others across the field. Grace, however, sat down on a fallen tree to rest her foot and for a minute or two thought herself alone. Then she rose as Askew came through the gap in the hedge. He began to pull about the broken rails and thorns, but saw her when he looked up.

"They have left you behind, Miss Osborn," he remarked with a smile.

"I think I had enough; besides, I hurt my foot."

"Badly?"

"No," said Grace. "I have only begun to feel it hurt, but I wish it wasn't quite so far to the bridge."

Askew looked at the water, measuring its height. "The stepping stones are not far off. One or two may be covered, but perhaps I could help you across and it would save you a mile."

Grace went on with him and they presently stopped beneath the alder branches by a sparkling shallow. Tall brush grew up the shady bank and briars trailed in the stream. A row of flat-topped stones ran across, but there were gaps where the current foamed over some that were lower than the rest. Grace's foot was getting worse, and sitting down on a slab of the slate stile, she glanced at her companion.

"I imagine it needed some pluck to stop the hunt," she said. "For one thing, you were alone; nobody agreed with you."

Askew smiled. "Opposition sometimes makes one obstinate, But do you think it's hard to stand alone?"

"Yes," said Grace impulsively. "I know it's hard. Yet, of course, if you feel you are taking the proper line you oughtn't to be daunted by what others think."

She stopped, remembering that the man was a stranger; and then resumed in a different tone, "But why did you really stop the hunt? Are you one of the people who don't believe in sport?"

"No," said Askew good humouredly. "It's curious that Mr. Thorn hinted something like this. Anyhow, I'm not a champion to the otter's right to destroy useful fish. I think they ought to be shot."

"Oh!" said Grace with a touch of indignation; "you would shoot an otter? Well, I suppose they must be killed; but to use a gun!"

"It's better for the otter. Which do you imagine it would choose—a mercifully sudden end, or two or three hours of agony, with men and dogs close behind, until the half-drowned, exhausted animal is torn to pieces or mangled by the poles?"

"I suppose one must answer as you expect."

"You're honest," Askew remarked. "I imagine it cost you something to agree!"

"It did," Grace admitted. "After all, you know our traditions, and many people, not cruel people, like the sport."

"That is so; but let's take the hunt to-day, for an example. There were three or four men without an occupation, and no doubt they find following the hounds healthy exercise. The others had left work that ought to be done; in fact, if you think, you'll own that some were men we have not much use for in the dale."

"Yes," said Grace, with some reluctance; "I know the men you mean. All the same, it is really not our business to decide if they ought to work or hunt."

Askew looked amused and she liked his twinkle.

After a moment or two he resumed: "It is not my business, anyhow, and I don't want to argue if otter-hunting is a proper sport; it's an advantage, so to speak, to stick to the point. All I objected to was the hunt's breaking down the mended bank. There are not many good meadows at the dale-head, and grass land is too valuable to be destroyed. Don't you think this justifies my opposition?"

"I suppose it does," Grace agreed, and then decided that she had talked to him long enough. "Well, I must go on," she added with a doubtful glance at the stream. "But it doesn't look as if one could get across."

"You can try," Askew replied, and jumping down stood in the water, holding out his hand. "Come on; there's not much risk of a slip."

Since it was too late to refuse, Grace took his hand and he waded across, steadying her, while the current rippled round his legs. Some of the stones were covered, but with his support she sprang across the gaps, and the effort did not hurt her foot as much as she had thought. He was not awkward. She liked his firm grasp, and his care that she did not fall; particularly since she saw he was satisfied to give her the help she needed and knew when to stop. After she got across she thanked him and let him go.

When she crossed the field Askew went home in a thoughtful mood, though he was conscious of a pleasant thrill. He had felt the girl's charm strongly as he stood near her at the stile, and now tried to recapture the scene: the dark alder branches moving overhead, the sparkle of the water, and the light and shadow that touched his companion. Her face was attractive; although he was not a judge of female beauty, he knew its moulding was good. Mouth, nose, and chin were finely but firmly lined; her colour was delicate pink and white, and she had rather grave blue eyes. Her figure was marked by a touch of patrician grace. Askew smiled as he admitted that patrician was a word he disliked, but he could not think of another that quite expressed what he meant. Anyhow, the girl's charm was strong; she was plucky and frank, perhaps because she knew her value and need not to pretend to dignity. In a sense, this was patrician, too.

All the same, Askew, though young and romantic, was not a fool. He had had a good education and had then spent two years at an agricultural college; but he was a farmer's son and knew where he stood, from the Osborns' point of view. He had been of help, but this was no reason Miss Osborn should recognise him when they next met; yet he somehow thought she would. In the meantime, it was rash to think about her much, although his thoughts returned to the stile beneath the alders where he had watched the sun and shadow play about her face.

CHAPTER III

A COUNCIL OF DEFENCE

THE sun had sunk behind the moors when Peter Askew sat by an open window in his big, slate-flagged kitchen at Ashness. All was quiet outside, except for the hoarse turmoil of the force and a distant bleating of sheep.

The kitchen was shadowy, because the house was old and built with low, mullioned windows to keep out snow and storm, and a clump of stunted ash trees grew outside the courtyard wall. A fire of roots and peat, however, burned in the deep hearth, and now and then a flickering glow touched old copper and dark oak with red reflections. Collectors had sometimes offered to buy the tall clock and ponderous meal chest, but Askew would not sell. The most part of his furniture had been brought to Ashness by his great-grandfather.

Peter's face was brown and deeply lined, and his shoulders were bent, for he had led a life of steady toil. This was rather from choice than stern necessity, because he owned the farm and had money enough to cultivate it well. As a rule, he was reserved and thoughtful, but his neighbours trusted him. They knew he was clever, although he used their homely dialect and lived as frugally as themselves. In the dale, one worked hard and spent no more than one need. Yet Peter had broken the latter rule when he resolved to give his son a wider outlook than he had had.

Kit had gone from the lonely farm to a good school where he had beaten, by brains and resolution, the sons of professional and business men. His teachers said he had talent, and although Peter was often lonely since his wife died, he meant to give the lad his chance. Somewhat to his relief, Kit decided to return to the soil, and Peter sent him to an agricultural college. Since Kit meant to farm he should be armed by such advantages as modern science could give. It was obvious that he would need them all in the struggle against low prices and the inclement weather

that vexed the dale. Now he had come home, in a sense not much changed, and Peter was satisfied. Kit and he seldom jarred, and the dalesfolk, who did not know how like they were under the surface, sometimes thought it strange.

Four or five of their neighbours sat in the kitchen, for the most part smoking quietly, but now and then grumbling about the recent heavy rain. This was not what they had come to talk about, and Peter waited. He knew their cautious reserve; they were obstinate and slow to move, and if he tried to hurry them might take alarm. By and by one knocked out his pipe.

"How are you getting forrad with t' peat-cutting?" he asked.

"We have cut enough to last for three or four months."

"You'll need it aw. Coal's a terrible price," another remarked.

"It will be dearer soon," said Peter. "Since Bell has t' lease o' both coal yards, he can charge what he likes."

"A grasping man! Yan canna get feeding stuff for stock, seed, an' lime, unless yan pays his price. Noo he has t' traction-engine, kilns, and mill, he'll own aw t' dale before lang."

"It's very possible, unless you stop him," Kit interposed quietly.

"Landlord ought to stop him," one rejoined.

Kit smiled. "That's too much to expect; it's your business to help yourselves. Mr. Osborn takes the highest rent that's offered, and you missed your chance when you let Bell get Allerby mill."

"Neabody else had t' money," another grumbled.

"Two or three of us could have clubbed together and made a profit after selling feeding stuff at a moderate price."

The others were silent for a minute or two and Kit let them ponder. He had learned something about the wastefulness of individual effort, and on his return to Ashness had urged the farmers to join in bidding for a lease of the mill. They had refused, and would need careful handling now, for the old co-operative customs that had ruled in the dale before the railway came had gone.

"Poor folks willunt have much left for groceries when they have paid Bell's price for coal," said one. "Since he gets his money for hauling iff t' slate, it costs him nowt t' tak' a big load back on t' lurry; but, with Redmire bank to clim', it's a terrible loss o' time carting half a ton up dale."

"You won't be able to buy the half-ton unless you deal with Bell. I think you'll find he has a contract for all the coal that comes down the line."

They pondered this and another remarked, "Peat's terrible messy stuff and bad to dry at back end o' year."

"It can be dried," said an old man. "I mind the time when niver a load o' coals went past Allerby. Aw t' folk clubbed togedder to cut and haul t' peat from Malton. Browt it doon on stane-boats by the oad green road. However, I reckon it cost them summat, counting their time."

Kit gave him a paper. "This is what our peat has cost us; I've charged our labour and what the horses would have earned if we had been paid for ploughing."

They studied the figures, passing the paper round, and then one said, "But peat costs you nowt. Malton moor is yours and I ken nea ither peat worth cutting. Mayhappen yan could find some soft trash on the back moor, but I doot if Osborn would let you bring it doon."

"Osborn does what his agent says, and it's weel kent Hayes is a friend o' Bell's," another agreed.

Peter smiled and gave Kit a warning glance. He suspected the agent had a private understanding that was not to his employer's benefit with Bell; but this was another matter. Peter had taught his son to concentrate on the business in hand.

"Weel," he said, "you can have aw t' peat you want and we willunt fratch if you pay me nowt. There's acres o' good stuff on Malton moor, and the value o' peat's t' labour it costs to cut. Aw t' same, it willunt pay to send a man or two noo and then. You must work in a gang; ivery man at his proper job."

"It was done like that in oad days," said one.

Peter looked at Kit, who did not speak, for both knew when enough was said. Indeed, although he was hardly

conscious of it yet, Kit had something of a leader's talent. For some minutes the others smoked and thought. They were independent and suspicious about new plans, but it was obvious that the best defence against a monopoly was a combine. In fact, they began to see it was the only defence they had. Then one turned to Peter.

"If you're for stopping Bell robbing us and starving poor folk at Allerby, I'm with you."

One after another promised his support, a plan was agreed upon, and Peter was satisfied when his neighbours went away.

"I reckon your plan will work," he said to Kit.

Kit nodded and picking up his hat and some letters went out. As he walked down the dale the moon rose above a shadowy fell, touching the opposite hillside with silver light that reached the fields at the bottom farther on. Tall pikes of wet hay threw dark shadows across a meadow, he heard the roar of a swollen beck. There was too much water in the dale, but Kit knew something might be done to make farming pay in spite of the weather. Land that had gone sour might be recovered by draining, and a bank could be built where the river now and then washed away the crops. Osborn, however, was poor and extravagant, and his agent's talents were rather applied to raising rents than improving the soil.

Kit stopped when he got near Allerby, where the dale widens and a cluster of low white houses stands among old trees. The village glimmered in the moonlight and beyond it rolling country, dotted by dark woods, ran back to the sea. A beck plunged down the hillside with a muffled roar, and a building, half in light and half in shadow, occupied the hollow of the ghyll. Kit, leaning on the bridge, watched the glistening thread of water that trickled over the new iron wheel, and noted the raw slate slabs that had been recently built into the mossy wall. A big traction-engine, neatly covered by a tarpaulin, and a trailer lurry stood in front of the sliding door.

Osborn had spent some money here, for Allerby mill, with its seed and chemical manure stores, paid him a higher rent than the best of his small farms. It was obviously well

managed by the tenant, and Kit approved. Modern machines and methods, although expensive, were good and were needed in the dale. The trouble was, they sometimes gave the man who could use them power to rob his poorer neighbours. Kit saw that concentrated power was often dangerous, and since unorganised, individual effort was no longer profitable, he knew no cure but co-operation.

He went on, and as he reached the first of the white houses a girl came out of a gate and stopped where the moonlight fell across the road. She had some beauty and her pose was graceful.

"Oh," she exclaimed, with rather exaggerated surprise, "it's Kit! I suppose you'll take this letter? I was going to the post."

Kit did not know much about young women, but hesitated, because he doubted if she wanted him to post the letter.

"If you like," he said. "I expect the causeway at the water-splash will be wet."

She gave him a curious smile. "Oh, well; here's the letter. Jim Nixon had to help me across the causeway when I went last night, and I don't suppose you're afraid of wetting your feet. You are used to it at Ashness."

"Yes," said Kit. "My boots are stronger than yours."

"Canny lad!" she answered, with a mocking laugh.

Kit felt embarrassed, for he thought he saw what she meant. Janet Bell was something of a coquette.

"I heard people coming down the road not long since," she resumed. "Have you had a supper party? Tell your father I think he's shabby because he left me out."

"It wasn't a supper party and there were no women. Three or four neighbours came in."

"To grumble about the weather or argue about the sheep?"

"They did grumble about the weather," Kit replied.

Janet looked amused. "You're very cautious, my lad; but you needn't take it for granted I'm always on father's side. Do you think I don't know why your neighbours came?"

"You don't know altogether."

The moonlight was clear enough to show that Janet coloured. "And you think I stopped you to find out?"

"I don't," said Kit, rather awkwardly. "Still, perhaps it's better that you shouldn't know."

"Oh," said she, with some emotion, "I can't tell if you mean to be nice or not. It's a lazy, feckless people who dislike father, because they're jealous; and they try to make things hard for me. Why should I suffer because he's cleverer than them?"

"You oughtn't to suffer. I really don't think people blame you."

"They do blame me," Janet insisted. "You doubted if you could trust me just now."

This was true enough to embarrass Kit, but he said, "I didn't see why I should talk to you about our business; that was all. In fact, I don't mean to talk about it to anybody."

"Now you're nicer. I didn't like to feel you were taking particular care not to let me know. Well, of course, father's no friend of yours and perhaps he'll like you worse by and by. But, after all, does that matter?"

"Not in a way," said Kit, pretending to be dull. "You have nothing to do with the dispute and we don't want to quarrel with your father, although we mean to carry out our plans."

Janet looked rather hard at him and there was some colour in her face, but she forced a smile.

"Oh, well! Good night! I've stopped you, and expect you want to get home."

She went back through the gate and Kit resumed his walk, struggling with an annoyance he felt was illogical. He knew something about Bell's household and imagined that Janet's life was not smooth. He was sorry for her, and it was, of course, unjust to blame her for her father's deeds.

By and by he came to the water-splash, where a beck crossed the road. Its channel was paved, so that one could drive across and at the side a stone causeway had been made for foot passengers. Sometimes, when the beck was unusually swollen, shallow water covered the stones, and

Kit saw the significance of a statement of Janet's as he noted the width of the submerged spot. It looked as if Jim Nixon had carried her across. Then his annoyance vanished and he laughed. Gallant or not he was satisfied to carry Janet's letter.

As he went on in the moonlight he began to see that there were some grounds for his reluctance to indulge the girl. He had thought about Miss Osborn often since he helped her across the stepping stones. He had not hesitated then, and although the things were different, to dwell upon the incident was perhaps rasher than indulging Janet. Miss Osborn had, no doubt, forgotten, but he had not. The trouble was he could not forget; his imagination pictured her vividly, sitting beneath the alders talking to him.

With something of an effort Kit pulled himself up. He was a small farmer's son and the Osborns were important people. He knew Osborn's family pride, which he thought his daughter had inherited. In Osborn, it was marked by arrogance; in the girl by a gracious, half-stately calm. For all that, the pride was there, and Kit, resolving that he would not be a fool, went on to the post office and put Janet's letter in the box.

CHAPTER IV

THE PEAT CUTTERS

OSBORN was dissatisfied and moody when, one afternoon, he stood, waiting for the grouse, behind a bank of turf on Malton moor. To begin with, he had played cards until the early morning with some of his guests and had been remarkably unluckly. Then he got up with a headache, for which he held his wife accountable; Alice was getting horribly parsimonious, and had bothered him until he tried to cut down his wine merchant's bill by experimenting with cheaper liquor. His headache was the consequence. The whisky he had formerly kept never troubled him like that.

Moreover, it was perhaps a mistake to invite Jardine, although he sometimes gave one a useful hint about speculations on the Stock Exchange. The fellow went to bigger shoots and looked bored when Osborn's partridges were scarce and wild; besides, he had broken rules in order to get a shot when they walked the turnip fields in line. Osborn imagined Jardine would not have done so had he been a guest at one of the houses he boasted about visiting.

As they climbed Malton Head another of the party had broken Dowthwaite's drystone wall and the farmer had said more about the accident than the damage justified. In fact, Dowthwaite was rather aggressive, and now Osborn came to think of it, one or two others had recently grumbled about things they had hitherto borne without complaint.

In the meantime, Osborn and Thorn, who shared his butt, looked about while they waited for the beaters. The row of turf banks, regularly spaced, ran back to the Force Crags at the head of the dale. The red bloom of the ling was fading from the moor, which had begun to get brown. Sunshine and shadow swept across it, and the blue sky was dotted by flying, white-edged clouds. A keen wind swept the high tableland, and the grouse, flying before it, would come over the butts very fast.

In the distance, one could distinguish a row of figures that were presently lost in a hollow and got larger when they reappeared. They were beaters, driving the grouse, and by and by Osborn, picking up his glasses, saw clusters of small dark objects that skimmed and then dropped into the heath. It was satisfactory to note that they were numerous. Although the birds were rather wild, he could now give his friends some sport. After a time, however, the clusters of dark dots scattered had vanished. Osborn frowned as he gave Thorn the glasses.

"What does that mean? Looks as if the birds had broken back."

"Some have broken back," said Thorn. "If they've flown over the beaters, we have lost them for the afternoon." He paused and resumed: "I think the first lot are dropping. No; they're coming on!"

Picking up his gun, he watched the advancing grouse.

They flew low but very fast, making a few strokes at intervals and then sailing on stretched wings down the wind. In a few moments they were large and distinct, but there were not enough to cross more than the first two butts. When they were fifty yards off Thorn threw up his gun and two pale flashes leaped out. Osborn was slower and swung his barrel. The sharp reports were echoed from the next butt and a thin streak of smoke that looked grey in the sunshine drifted across the bank of turf. Two brown objects, spinning round, struck the heath and a few light feathers followed. The grouse that had escaped went on and got small again.

"Missed with my right," said Osborn. "Had to shoot on the swing. Don't know about the other barrel."

Thorn did know, but used some tact. "I may have been a trifle slow; my last bird was going very fast."

"I expect you saw whose bird it was," Osborn said to the lad who took their guns.

"Yes, sir; Mr. Thorn's, sir."

"Oh, well," said Osborn, forcing a smile as he turned to Thorn, "you have youth upon your side. Anyhow, I don't imagine the others have done much better, and it looks as if we might as well go home. When the birds broke back we lost the best chance we'll get. I wonder what spoiled the drive?"

"Something on the old green road, I think. The grouse turned as they crossed the hollow."

A short distance off there was a fold in the moor, and while Osborn wondered whether he would walk to the top a man came over the brow, leading two horses that hauled a clumsy sledge. Another team followed and presently four advanced across the heath.

"Now you know what spoiled the drive," Thorn remarked with some dryness. "You can't expect a good shoot on the day your tenants move their peat."

Osborn, who was very angry, picked up the glasses. "The first two are not my tenants. They're the Askews, and the boundary of their sheepwalk runs on this side of the green road."

"Then I suppose there's nothing to be said!"

Osborn's friends had left the other butts and come up, with Jardine in front. He was a fat, red-faced man, and as he got nearer remarked to his companions: "I call it wretched bad management! Somebody ought to have turned the fellows off the moor."

Osborn heard and glanced at Thorn as he left the butt. "There is something to be said; I'm going to relieve my mind."

He went off and signalled the farmers to stop. They waited, standing quietly by their horses. On the open moor, their powerful figures had a touch of grace, and their clothes, faded by sun and rain, harmonised with the colour of the heath. Peter Askew's brown face was inscrutable when he fixed his steady eyes on Osborn.

"You turned back the grouse and spoiled the beat. Do you call that sporting?" Osborn asked.

"I'm sorry," Peter replied. "If I'd kenned you were shooting, mayhappen we could have put off leading the peat."

"You knew we were shooting when you saw the beater."

"Aw, yis," said Peter. "It was over late then. I wadn't willingly spoil any man's sport, but we had browt eight horses and had to get to work."

"You have plenty of work at Ashness."

"It's verra true; but the weather's our master and we canna awtogether do what we like. The peat's mair important than a few brace of grouse."

"Important to you!" Osborn rejoined. "But what about me and my friends? One has come from London for a few days' sport."

"Then I'm sorry he has lost the afternoon," Kit interposed quietly. "But you well know the wages labourers get in the dale, and there are old folks and some sick at Allerby who need a good fire. The winter's hard and some of the cottages are very damp."

"The farmers pay the wages."

"None of them make much money. They pay what their rent allows."

"I don't force up the rents. They're fixed by the terms new tenants are willing to offer when a lease runs out."

"That is so," Kit agreed. "I don't know that my neighbours grumble much because the rule works on your side. But peat is plentiful and we don't see why it can't be used when coal is dear."

"I imagine you see an opportunity of selling the right to cut it," Osborn sneered.

"We are willing to sell at the buyers' price. Anybody who can't pay may have the peat for nothing. None of the day labourers has paid us yet."

Osborn did not know whether he could believe this statement or not, but he said ironically, "Then it looks as if you were generous! However you are not a friend of my agent's, and no doubt see a chance of making trouble. When you meddle with my tenants you play a risky game, and they may find they were foolish to join you."

One of the farmers who had stood quietly by Peter Askew looked up with a slow smile; another's weatherbeaten face got a little harder. They were seldom noisily quarrelsome, but they were stubborn and remembered an injury long. Peter, however, interposed:

"We won't fratch; there's not much in arguing. You can beat moor t'ither side o' green road. Good day to you!"

He spoke to the horses and the sledge lurched forward with its chocolate-coloured load. The other teams strained at the chains; there was a beat of hoofs, and the row of sledges moved noisily away. Osborn waited for a few moments, but his face was very red when he went back to the butts. The farmer's refusal to dispute with him was galling. For all that, he must try to find his friends some sport, and after consulting with his gamekeeper sent the beaters on across the moor.

The new drive was not successful, and in the evening the party came down the hill with a very poor bag. When they reached the Redmire wood Osborn stopped beside a broken hedge. Red beeches shone among the yellow birches and dark firs, the sun was low and its slanting rays touched the higher branches, but the gaps between the trunks were filled with shadow. A few bent figures moved in the gloom, and Osborn frowned when three or four children came down

a drive, dragging a heavy fallen bough. A woman with a sack upon her back followed them slowly, and it was obvious that cottagers from Allerby were gathering fuel.

"Confound them! This is too much!" he exclaimed and beckoned his gamekeeper. "If that is Mrs. Forsyth, tell her to come up."

The woman advanced and rested her sack upon the hedge. Her wrinkled face was wet with sweat, but she did not look alarmed.

"Eh!" she said, "sticks is heavy and I'm none so young as I was."

"You have no business in the wood," said Osborn sternly.

"There's nea place else where we can pick up sticks."

"That is your affair. You know you're not allowed to gather wood in my plantations."

"We canna gan without some kindling; when you canna keep it dry, peat is ill to light. Terrible messy stuff, too, and mak's nea end o' dirt."

The children came up and when they stood, open-mouthed, gazing at the party one of the sportsmen laughed.

"Then burn coal and the dirt won't bother you," Osborn rejoined.

"Hoo can we burn coal?" the woman asked. "Noo Tom Bell has lease o' baith yards, he's putten up t' price, and when you've paid what he's asking there's nowt left for meal. I canna work for Mrs. Osborn as I used, and with oad Jim yearning nobbut fifteen shilling——"

She paused for breath and wiped her hot face, and Osborn signed to the keeper. The woman was making him ridiculous.

"Turn them all out, Holiday," he said and went on with his friends.

"The old lady's talkative," one remarked. "Quite frank, but not at all angry; I thought her line was rather dignified. I've met country folks who'd have been servilely apologetic, and some wh would have called you ugly names."

"These people are never apologetic," Osborn said. "As a rule, they're not truculent, but they're obstinate."

"I think I see. After all, it's possible to stick to your

point without abusing your antagonist. I suppose you turned them out because of the pheasants ? "

" Yes ; good cover's scarce, and if the birds are disturbed they move down to Rafton Woods. For a sporting neighbour, Hayton hardly plays the game. To put down corn is, of course, allowable, but he uses damaged raisins ! "

" Then you don't feed ? "

" Very little," Osborn replied. " Corn's too dear. The Tarnside pheasants live on the country."

" I expect that really means they live on the farmers ! "

Osborn frowned. It was Jardine's habit to make stupid remarks like that ; Osborn wondered whether the fellow thought them smart.

" The farmers knew my rules when they signed the lease," he said. " Anyhow, pheasants do much less damage than ground game, and I don't think my tenants have left a hare in the dale."

Jardine began to talk about something else, and no more was said about Osborn's grievances until the party met on the new terrace in the twilight. The tarn glimmered with faint reflections from the west, but thin mist drifted across the pastures, and the hills rose, vague and black, against the sky, in which a half moon shone. Osborn, sitting at the top of the shallow steps that went down to the lawn, grumbled to his wife about the day's shooting. Grace, who stood close by with Thorn, indicated the smooth gravel and the low, wide-topped wall on which red geraniums grew.

" This," she said, " is a great improvement on the old grass bank. The wide steps and broad slate coping have an artistic effect. However, you can't often get the things you like without paying."

" Very true, but rather trite," Osborn agreed. " I don't see how it applies."

" Well, I'm really sympathetic about your spoiled day, but it looks as if all your disappointments sprang from the same cause."

" Ah ! " said Osborn sharply ; " I suppose you mean the coal yards' lease ? "

" I think I mean Bell's greediness. If he didn't charge

so much for his coal, Askew would not have cut the peat, and the children would not have been sent to gather wood. Then Dowthwaite might not have grumbled about his wall; he feels the farmers have not been treated justly, and I imagine he blames you."

Osborn knitted his brows. "Then, it's an example of the fellow's wrong-headed attitude! He and one or two others are treated better than they deserve, and would not be satisfied with anything I did. If you had to manage the estate, pay extortionate taxes, and make the unnecessary repairs the farmers demand, it would be interesting to see the line you would take."

"Perhaps the right line isn't easy," Grace admitted. "Still, if I wanted a guide, there's the motto of our county town: 'Be just and fear not.'"

Osborn looked at her with indignant surprise, and then shrugged scornfully. Thorn smiled.

"It's an excellent motto; but they chose it some time since. One imagines it's out of date now."

Grace coloured and moved away, feeling embarrassed. She had made herself ridiculous, and perhaps sentiment such as she had indulged was cheap; but it hurt to feel that she, so to speak, stood alone. Although she had, no doubt, been imprudent, she had said what she felt, and Thorn had smiled. She turned to him angrily when he followed her along the terrace.

"I dare say I am a raw sentimentalist, but I'm glad I'm not up to date," she said. "I hate your modern smartness!"

Thorn, noting the hardness of her voice, stopped with an apologetic gesture and let her go.

CHAPTER V

RAILTON'S TALLY

WINTER had begun, and although the briars shone red along the hedgerows and the stunted oaks had not lost all their leaves, bitter sleet blew across the dale when Grace went up the muddy lonning to Mireside farm.

Railton's daughter had for a time helped the housekeeper at Tarnside, and Grace, hearing that the farmer had been ill, was going to ask about him. It was nearly dark when she entered the big kitchen. The lamp had not been lighted, but a peat fire burned in the wide grate, where irons for cooking pots hung above the blaze. A bright glow leaped up and spread about the kitchen, touching the people in the room, and then faded as she shut the massive door.

Grace thought her arrival had embarrassed the others, because nobody said anything for a moment or two. Railton sat in an old oak chair by the fire, with a stick near his hand; Tom, the shepherd, occupied the middle of the floor; and Kit Askew leaned against the table, at which Mrs. Railton and Lucy sat. Grace wished she could see them better, but the blaze had sunk and the fire burned low, giving out an aromatic smell, and throwing dull reflections on the old oak furniture, copper kettles, and tall brass candlesticks.

Then Mrs. Railton began to talk, rather nervously, and Grace turned to the farmer as the light spread about the room again. He had a thin, lined face; his shoulders were bent, and his pose was slack.

"How are you to-day?" she asked.

"No varra weel. I'm none so young, and the wet and cold dinna agree with my oad bones. Mayhappen I'll be better soon, but noo when I'm needed I canna get aboot."

"He'll not can rest," Mrs. Railton interposed. "He was oot in sleet, boddering among t' sheep aw day."

"And weel you ken I had to gan," the farmer rejoined.

Mrs. Railton's silence implied agreement and Grace's curiosity was excited because of something she had heard at home. Railton's lease of the sheepwalk ran out in a few days, but he was by local custom entitled to its renewal after a review of the terms. Moreover, it was usual for the tenant to take the sheep with the farm, and leave them equal in number and condition when he went. The landlord could then demand a valuation and payment of the difference, if the flocks had fallen below the proper standard.

" Why are you forced to go out in this bitter weather ? " she asked.

Railton hesitated, and then saw his daughter's meaning glance. Lucy was clever, and he thought she wanted him to be frank.

" I had to see how sheep were," he answered dully. " Not that it was o' much use. T' lambs niver get over wet spring and t' ewes is poor. Then flock is weel under tally ; I've lost two score Swinset Herdwicks, and the mak-up's next Thursday."

" But how did you lose forty sheep ? " Grace asked.

" There was a hole in fell dyke and Swinset sheep are thief sheep, varra bad to haad. I bowt ewes there and t' lambs followed when they wandert back to their heaf."

Grace pondered. She had noted some reserve in Railton's manner when he mentioned the broken dyke and knew the flockmasters were careful about their dry walls. The rest was plain ; the *heaf* is the hill pasture where a lamb is born, and Swinset was fifteen miles away. It was a very large sheepwalk and much time would be needed to find the sheep on the wide belt of moor.

" If you know the sheep are at Swinset, they would be allowed for in the count," she said.

" I have my doubts. Mr. Hayes sent me notice tally would be taken on Thursday and he's a hard man."

Grace coloured. She did not like Hayes, he was Osborn's agent. There was much she wanted to know, but she could not ask.

" Mr. Hayes cannot do exactly as he likes ; he must get my father's consent," she said. " However, as I am going home by the field path, I had better start before it's dark."

" There's a broken gate that's awkward to open. I will come with you until you reach it," Kit remarked.

They went out together. The sleet had stopped, but leaden clouds rolled across the hills that glimmered white in the dusk. As they struck across a wet field Grace said :

" I suppose Railton's flock is below the proper standard and the count is short ? "

" Yes ; the two or three wet years have hit the flock-

masters hard, and Railton had to sell more stock than was prudent, in order to pay his debts."

"Then if he can't pay the difference in number and value, the lease can be broken?"

Kit made a sign of agreement and Grace asked: "But do you think Hayes would break the lease and turn him out?"

"It's possible," Kit answered cautiously.

Grace gave him a sharp glance. "What do you really think, Mr. Askew? I want to know."

"Then, my notion is Hayes would like to get Mireside for Jim Richardson."

"Richardson is his nephew."

"Just so," said Kit, with some dryness. "All the same, he'd make a good tenant. His father is rich enough to start him well."

Grace's eyes sparkled, for she saw where the hint led, but she hid her resentment, because, after all, she had doubts. Osborn needed money and Hayes was cunning.

"I imagine it would hurt Railton to leave."

"It would hurt him much. He was born at Mireside and his father took the farm from your grandfather, a very long time since. Then he's an old man and has not enough money to begin again at another place."

"Ah," said Grace, "it would be very hard if he had to go! But if he hasn't money, he couldn't carry on, even if we renewed the lease."

"We have had remarkably bad weather for two or three years and the cold rain killed the young lambs, but a change is due. A dry spring and fine summer would put the old man straight."

Grace was silent for a few moments and then looked at Kit with some colour in her face.

"Thank you for making the situation plain. You were not anxious to do so, were you? I think you don't trust us!"

"I don't trust Hayes," Kit said awkwardly.

"But Hayes is our agent. We are accountable for what he does."

"In a way, I suppose you are accountable. For all

that, when a landlord has a capable agent it is not the rule for him to meddle. I understand Mr. Osborn leaves much to Hayes."

Grace pondered. Kit's embarrassment indicated that he was trying to save her feelings, but he must know, as she knew, that a landlord was rightly judged by his agent's deeds. Although she rather liked Kit Askew, he had humiliated her.

"Well," she said resolutely, "something must be done. If the strayed sheep could be found, it would help."

"Yes," said Kit. "Tom and I start for Swinset to-morrow to try to bring them back. But if you'll wait a moment, I'll open the gate."

He walked through the mud the cattle had churned up, and lifting the broken gate, pushed it back so that Grace could cross a drier spot. Then, as he stood with his hands on the rotten bars, she stopped.

"Don't start for Swinset until you hear from me," she said. "Thank you. Good night!"

Grace went on and Kit returned back to the farm with a satisfaction that made his heart beat. In a way, the girl had given him her confidence; she had, at least, not hidden her feelings. Her proud calm was only on the surface; it covered a generous, impulsive nature. Then she had pluck, because he could understand her difficulties. She was loyal to her father, but hated injustice and was quickly moved to sympathy.

When Kit returned to the farm kitchen Railton was sitting moodily by the fire and his wife's face was sternly set. They are not an emotional people in the dales, and her trouble was too deep for useless tears, but as she glanced about the room all she saw wakened poignant memories. The old china in the rack had been her mother's; she had brought it and the black oak meal-chest to Mireside thirty years since. The copper kettles and jelly-pan were wedding presents, and Tom, her son, who died in Australia, had sent the money to buy the sewing machine. Now it looked as if her household treasures must be sold, and to leave Mireside would mean the tearing up of roots that struck deep Besides, while she would suffer it would hurt

her husband worse. When Kit came in she gave him a keen glance.

"Weel, what had Miss Osborn to say?"

"She didn't say much; I think she means to talk to Osborn."

Railton looked up gloomily. "T' lass has a good heart, but talking to Osborn will be o' nea use. Hayes is real master and he wants Mireside for Jim Richardson."

Kit made a sign of agreement. "The fellow's getting dangerous and must be stopped. I suspect he's backing Bell and now he means to use his nephew; it's not altogether for Richardson's sake he wants to break your lease. Some day I imagine Osborn will find his agent owns the estate; but that's not our business. Well, Peter told me to remind you that you and he are old friends, and if a hundred pounds would be some help——"

"It would be a big help," said Railton; but when Mrs. Railton awkwardly began to thank him Kit turned to the shepherd.

"About the broken dyke, Tom? What d'you think brought it down?"

"I canna tell. Dyke's good and there was nea wind."

They were all silent for a few moments; and then Kit said, "Well, Richardson is a cunning hound." He paused and picked up his hat before he turned to Railton. "I've a job at Ashness that must be finished to-night. There's not much time, but if it's possible Tom and I will find the sheep."

In the meantime, Grace walked home thinking hard. Kit was Railton's friend, but he had used some tact, until she forced him to tell her the truth. This, however, was not important, because she had got a jar. It looked as if Osborn had consented to a cruel plot; a landlord ought to help his tenants and not take advantage of their need. She tried not to blame him; he had a bad agent, who used a dangerous influence. She must try to protect him from the fellow and, so to speak, from his own carelessness.

After all, it was, for the most part, carelessness, because he did not know Hayes as she knew him. Still, she had not undertaken an easy thing, and she braced herself as

she went up the steps of the new terrace. Grace hated the terrace. It was the price they, the Osborns, had taken for a shabby deed, and for which poor people and hard-worked women paid. Grace knew about the extra dust that peat fires caused and how often the bread was spoiled.

When she entered the library Osborn was studying some documents. He looked up impatiently, and she said, "I was at Mireside. Railton's no better and is much disturbed about his lease."

"Not more disturbed than he deserves!" Osborn rejoined. "The fellow has been getting slack for some time; he sold his store sheep imprudently and let the flock run down."

Grace was surprised her father did not see that his statement had a humorous touch, since improvident extravagance was his rule; but it was obvious that he did not.

"One cannot save much money when rents are high and prices are very low."

"Do you know much about these matters?" Osborn asked.

Grace hesitated. She began to see that Osborn could not be moved, but she had undertaken to plead Railton's cause and must try.

"He's an old man and has been at Mireside all his life. He has worked hard and always paid his rent. Now he's ill and in trouble, it would be shabby to turn him out because there's a risk—it's only a risk—that we might lose something by letting him stop."

"You don't seem to understand a landlord's duty," Osborn rejoined. "He is, so to speak, the steward in charge of the estate; it belongs to the family and is not his. He must hand it on in good order and this means he cannot indulge his sentimental impulses. If he keeps a bad tenant from pity, or because he's afraid to seem harsh, he robs his heir."

Grace knew there were other, and perhaps worse, ways of robbing one's heir; but she said, "Aren't you taking Hayes's view that Railton is a bad tenant? After all, we are responsible."

"Then you suggest that Hayes is mistaken?" Osborn asked ironically.

"I don't know if he's mistaken or not," said Grace, with a steady look. "I know he's greedy and unjust. But there's a thing you ought not to let him do. Railton has lost forty sheep, that have strayed back to Swinset, and Hayes doesn't mean to count them in the tally."

Osborn's face got red and he knitted his brows. "I have tried to be patient; but this is too much! Do you know more about managing an estate than an experienced agent? Or do you think I'm a fool and Hayes leads me like a child? Anyhow, you are much too young to criticise my actions. Let us have no more of it! An unmarried girl is not entitled to opinions that clash with her parents."

Grace went out silently. To know that she had failed hurt her pride, and it hurt worse to suspect that her father had got angry because he knew she was right. But there was a way by which Railton might save his lease and Kit could help. Getting a pencil and paper, she wrote him a very short note:

"You must find Railton's sheep."

Then, knowing that she was rash, she went to look for the gardener's boy, and sent him to Ashness.

CHAPTER VI

BLEATARN GHYLL

IT was getting dark when Kit and Tom, the shepherd, stopped to rest behind a cairn on the summit of Swinset moor. Close by, the two score sheep stood in a compact flock, with heads towards the panting dogs. They were Herdwicks, a small, hardy breed that best withstands the rain and snow that sweep the high fells in the lambing season. When he had lighted his pipe, Kit thoughtfully looked about.

On one side the barren moor, getting dim in the distance, rolled back to the edge of the low country. Here and there patches of melting sleet gleamed a livid white among the withered ling, and storm-torn hummocks of peaty soil shone dark chocolate-brown. These were the only touches of colour in the dreary landscape, except for the streak of pale-yellow sky that glimmered above a long black ridge. On the other side, a line of rugged fells, with summits lost in snow clouds, rose dark and forbidding. It was very cold and a biting wind swept the heath.

Kit was tired, for he had been on the moor since morning and had not eaten much. It was an awkward matter to find the sheep, and then the men and dogs had some difficulty to keep the ewes moving, because the Herdwick never willingly leaves the neighbourhood where it was born and will, if possible, return. The lambs, now grown large and fat, gave less trouble, and when they sometimes stopped irresolutely while the ewes tried to break away Kit understood their hesitation. Two instincts were at work : it was natural to follow their dams, but Mireside was their native heaf and they knew they were going home.

Now they had gone some distance, Kit had to make a choice. One could reach Mireside by a rough moorland road, but it went round the hills, and there was a shorter way across the range. If he went round, he might arrive late for the reckoning and some of the lambs would get footsore and stop. On the other hand, he knew the fells and shrank from trying to find his way among the crags in the dark. It was, however, important that he should not be late. Hayes was hard, and the Herdwicks must arrive in time to be tallied with the rest of Railton's flock. In the dale, a tenant had a traditional right to have his sheep valued by a jury of his neighbours, and Hayes had fixed the time at eight o'clock next day. The animals, however, must be sorted and penned before this, and the work would begin early in the morning.

" We had better try the fells, Tom," said Kit.

The shepherd looked at the threatening sky and fading line of rugged heights.

" Aw, yes. It's gan t' be a rough neet, but we'll try 't.

We can rest a bit at oad mine-house this side Bleatarn ghyll."

Now their route was fixed, Kit mused about something else. Railton was his neighbour, but, except for this, Kit had no particular grounds for helping him; he had obviously nothing to gain. Then, the peat-cutting was his plan; he had, without altogether meaning to do so, allowed himself to become the leader of the revolt against Osborn. In a way, of course, he was the proper man, because Ashness belonged to his father, and Hayes could not punish him for meddling. Still, Hayes could punish the tenant farmers and Kit knew they ran some risk.

On the whole, he thought the risk worth while. He had a talent that was beginning to develop for leading and saw when one could negotiate and when one must fight. He did not want to fight Osborn, but was being forced into the conflict, and it was comforting to feel that Miss Osborn was not against him. Her note, telling him he must find the sheep, was in his pocket, and he thought it had cost her something to write. She was generous and plucky and he must not hesitate. After all, the job was his and since he had accepted it, he must, if needful, bear the consequences. Knocking out his pipe he got up.

"We'll make a start, Tom," he said. . . .

Two hours afterwards, he stopped for breath at the bottom of a narrow valley. The sleet had turned to driving snow, the wind howled in the rocks above, and a swollen beck brawled angrily among the stones. Tom was hardly distinguishable a few yards ahead and Kit could not see the sheep, but the barking of the dogs came faintly down the steep white slope. The Herdwicks were strung out along the hillside, with a dog below and above, and it was comforting to know they could not leave the valley, which was shut in by rugged crags. For a time, driving them would be easy; but it would be different when they left the water and climbed the rise to Bleatarn ghyll.

"How far are we off the mine-house, Tom?" he shouted.

"I dinna ken," said the shepherd. "Mayhappen two miles. Ewes is travelling better; t' lambs is leading them."

Kit agreed and they pushed on through the snow. After a time, the ground got steeper, and when they crossed the noisy beck and scrambled up a shaly bank, Kit was glad to see a broken wall loom among the tossing flakes. This was the shaft-house of an abandoned mine, and there was a sheepfold, built with the pulled-down material close by. He shouted and waited until he heard the dogs bark and a rattle of stones. The Herdwicks were coming down and presently broke out from the snow in a compact, struggling flock. Tom shouted and threw a hurdle across the entrance when the dogs had driven the sheep into the fold.

"I dinna ken if snow'll tak' off or not, but it's early yet and we must have a rest before we try t' ghyll," he said.

They went into the shaft-house and Kit struck a match. One end of the building had been pulled down and the snow blew in through holes in the roof, but a pile of dry fern filled a corner and rotten beams lay about. With some trouble, they lighted a fire and, sitting down close by, took out the food they had brought. The wind screamed about the ruined walls, the smoke eddied round them, and now and then a shower of snow fell on their heads, but they had some shelter and could, if forced, wait for morning.

"Miss Osborn's a bonny lass and kind; but I reckon she couldn't talk her father round," Tom presently remarked.

"No," said Kit. "I believe she tried."

"Favours her mother," Tom resumed. "Mrs. Osborn's heart is good, but at Tarnside women dinna count. It's a kind o' pity, because t' Osborn menfolk are lakers and always was."

A *laker* is a lounging pleasure-seeker and Kit thought the name was justified.

"I sometimes think Osborn means well," he said.

"Mayhappen! For aw his ordering folks aboot, he's wake; like his father, I mind him weel. Might mak' a fair landlord if he was letten and had t' money; but oad Hayes is grasping and always at his tail."

"The rent-roll's good. The estate could be managed well."

"There's t' mortgages and Osborn canna keep money. When he has it he must spend. There would be nea poor landlords, if I had my way. I'd let them putten rents up if they had money and spent it on the land. Low rent means poor farming."

Kit knew this was true on the Tarnside estate. Dykes that had kept the floods off the meadows were falling down, drains were choked, and land that had grown good crops was going sour. The wise use of capital would make a wholesome change, but Kit did not altogether like centralised control. Although it was economical, the landlord got the main advantage, and there was much a farmer could do, in co-operation with his neighbours, to help himself, if his lease was long enough. Then, joint action was once common in the dale. Men pooled their labour and implements at haytime and harvest, and combined for their mutual benefit in other ways. Now it looked as if they might combine again.

"Are they grumbling much at Allerby about burning peat?" he asked.

"T' women grumble," Tom said dryly. "But they willunt stop, for aw the dirt peat mak's an' they canna get ovens hot. I reckon Bell has mair coal coming in than he can get shut of. When I was at station last t' yards was nearly full."

"I rather think Bell has been too greedy. He must pay for the coal as it arrives and his money is probably getting short; the traction engine and trailer cost a good sum, and he has spent something on the limekilns. In fact, if we hold on, he's bound to give way."

"Then we'll breck him. Our folk are slow to fratch, but they're not quick at letting go," said Tom, who paused and added: "I wunner where Bell got his money; he had none when he took a job at mill in oad Osborn's time."

This started Kit on another line of thought. Bell had, no doubt, saved something, for he was parsimonious, and was too keen a business man to leave his money in the bank. All he made by one speculation was sunk in another; but, after allowing for this, it was hard to see where he got the capital for his numerous ventures. Kit wondered whether

Hayes helped ; if he did, it was not from friendship. The agent was clever and might be playing a cunning game, in which he used both Osborn and Bell. In fact, Kit thought if he were Osborn he would watch Hayes. This, however, was not his business, and getting up he went to a hole in the wall.

It was snowing very hard ; he could see nothing but a haze of tossing flakes, and the wind filled the valley with its roar. He could hardly hear the beck a few yards off.

" The drifts will be getting deep, but we can't start yet," he said. " If we miss the track at the top, there's nothing to stop us falling over the Ling Crag."

Tom agreed, and Kit shivered when he sat down again. He was cold and tired, and the worst part of the journey must yet be made. Looking at his watch he resigned himself to wait, and leaned back with eyes closed against the wall while a wet dog crouched at his feet. An hour or two passed and then Tom got up.

" Snow's takin' off," he said. " We must try it."

Kit, pulling himself together, went out and faced the storm. The snow was thinner, but the wind had not dropped and buffeted him savagely as he struggled through a drift to the fold. The dogs had some trouble to drive out the sheep. and when they straggled through the opening Kit imagined the lambs went in front. In a few moments the flock vanished, and he breathed hard as he followed their track up hill. Now and then the dogs barked, but for the most part he heard nothing except the roar of the wind in the crags. He hoped the dogs could find the path across the narrow tableland between two branching ghylls, because it was obvious that his judgment might be at fault. However, there were the lambs ; one could trust a Herdwick to return to its heaf.

When he reached the top the wind had blown away the snow, and he stood near the middle of a narrow belt of heath, with his feet sinking in a bog. On each side, he got a glimpse of dark rocks, streaked with white where the wind had packed the snow into the gullies. In front there was a gulf, down which his path led. Scattered snowflakes and rolling mist streamed up from the forbidding

hollow. At first he could see nothing of the sheep, but as he floundered across the bog the dogs barked and he found them presently, guarding the flock in a hollow among the crags.

The sheep broke away and Kit pushed on across the narrow belt of bog that was dotted by the marks of little feet. Sometimes he slackened his pace to wait for Tom; the shepherd was getting old and the long climb had tired him. Both stopped for some moments when they reached the brow of the descent, and Kit, bracing himself against the storm, tried to look about. He thought he saw the flock close in front.

"They seem doubtful where to go," he said.

"We can do nowt but leave them to find t'ghyll," the shepherd remarked.

Kit agreed. Bleatarn ghyll was beneath him, but there was another hollow and it is hard to walk straight down hill in the dark. He must trust the sheep, and, huddling close together, they refused to leave the crag. When the dogs drove them out they vanished, and since the ground was bare of snow they left no tracks.

He stumbled on, falling into pools and stumbling across banks of stones, and soon stopped again. He had come down the slope, so to speak, blindly, and now stood on the edge of a vast, dark pit. One could not see beyond the edge, but the confused noises that came up hinted at profound depth. The gale shrieked, but he heard the roar of falling water and the rattle of stones the wind dislodged.

"Do you think this is Bleatarn ghyll?" he asked.

"I dinna ken," Tom answered; and added hopefully, "if it's t'ither, we'll mayhappen find oot before we step over Ling Crag."

They went down at a venture, whistling vainly for the dogs. The drop was very sharp, and now they were leaving the wind-swept pass, the snow had begun to pack among the stones and boggy grass. Still, so far as they could see, there were no marks of little feet and they wondered what had happened to the flock, until a faint bark came out of the mist. The noise got louder and Kit knew the dogs were running round the stopping sheep.

"We're right," he said. "They've gone through the broken wall and the dogs are holding them at the top of the force."

A few minutes afterwards he scrambled over a pile of fallen stones, shouted to Tom, and began to run, for he understood what had happened. The broken wall marked the boundary of the Mireside heaf and the sheep were now on familiar ground. It was his business to drive them to the farm, but they were trying to turn off to look for shelter among the crags. At the force, where the Bleatarn beck leaps in linked falls to the valley, one could get down between the water and the rocks; on the other side, a path about a foot wide led across the face of a precipice. In daylight, if the stones were dry, a man with steady nerves could use the path, but when slab and scree were packed with snow nothing but a Herdwick could cross it safely. The dogs knew this and were trying to hold the flock.

When the men came up they saw an indistinct, woolly mass on the other side of the beck. The mass was not level but slanted sharply, and the sheep at the bottom sent down showers of stones as they surged to and fro, with heads turned to the dogs. It was obvious that they did not mean to go down the ghyll, and Herdwicks born among the crags can climb where no dog can follow.

"The dogs canna turn them," gasped Tom. "They'll be away ower Eel Scar; they're brekkin' noo."

The flock began to open out and three or four sheep straggled forward, but Kit's bob-tailed dog slid down a snowy slab and fell upon the first. The sheep ran back, but the others stood and Kit saw the dog could not stop them long. The Herdwicks knew the advantage was theirs on ground like this.

Jumping from a boulder, he fell into the swollen beck and made his way up the nearly perpendicular slab. At the top he found a dangerous ledge and advanced upon the sheep, which had their backs to the stream. Twining his fingers in a lamb's wool, he picked up the animal and balancing himself precariously, threw it as far as he could. It fell into the beck and scrambled out on the other side,

where the track led down the ghyll. The effort had cost him much, for his heart beat and he gasped for breath, but he doubted if he had done enough. Dragging another lamb from the flock, he hurled it into the water, and then his foot slipped and he rolled down the slab and fell in the snow.

He got up, badly shaken, and saw that his plan had worked. Sheep will follow a leader and the flock was straggling down the ghyll behind the lambs. Kit recrossed the beck and descended cautiously, keeping close to the rocks.

Somehow he got down, but he was exhausted and breathless when he reached the bottom, where he was forced to wait before he could whistle to his dog. He heard its bark and stumbling forward, found the flock bunched together in a hollow. Then he sat down in the snow while Tom counted the sheep.

"They're aw here," said the shepherd. "A better job than I thowt we'd mak! Weel, let's gan on."

Kit was tired, and bruised by his fall, but he went forward behind the dogs. His troubles were over, for a broad, smooth path led along the hill-foot to Mireside.

CHAPTER VII

THE RECKONING

IN the flagged kitchen, Mrs. Railton and Lucy bustled about by the light of a lamp and the glow of the fire. The table was covered with used plates and cups. The men outside had breakfasted, but one or two more might come and Mrs. Railton wondered when Kit would arrive. She had lain awake for the most part of the night, thinking about him and the strayed Herdwicks while she listened to the gale. Now and then Lucy went to the door and looked up the dale to the glimmering line of foam that marked the

spot where Bleatarn beck came down. A path followed the waterside, but she could not see men or sheep in the gloom, and if Kit did not come soon he would be too late.

Railton sat gloomily by the fire. He had had rheumatic fever, and the damp cold racked his aching joints ; besides, there was nothing for him to do. He had called in his neighbours to value his flock, but he knew, to a few pounds, what their judgment would be. Hayes would presently arrive, and Railton would be asked to pay, or give security for, the shortage, which was impossible. Hayes knew this and meant to break his lease. Perhaps the hardest thing was that the shortage was small ; if the next lambing season were good, he could pay. But Hayes would not wait.

Although Railton was too proud to beg for help from his neighbours, he had gone to the bank. Osborn, however, used the same bank, and it looked as if Hayes had given the manager a hint, because he refused a loan. Askew had offered a hundred pounds, but this was not enough, and even if Kit arrived with the sheep from Swinset, Railton could not find the rest of the money. However, the arrival of the Herdwicks would make a difference, and he did not altogether give up hope. By and by he tried to get up, and sitting down again with a groan, beckoned his wife.

" Martha, you might gan to door."

Mrs. Railton, knowing what he meant, went to the porch. It was lighter outside and the hillside was growing distinct. She thought something moved on the path beside the beck, and turned to her daughter, who had followed.

" What's yon by the water, Lucy ? "

Lucy was silent for a few moments and then said quietly, " I think it's sheep ! "

She watched the path. The mist made a puzzling background and her eyes were getting dazzled ; but there was something. Then she heard a chair jar on the flags and glanced at Railton, who leaned forward.

" Weel ? " he said. " Canna you speak ? Is neabody coming yet ? "

Lucy threw another glance up the dale and her heart beat. An indistinct row of small dark objects moved along the path, with two tall figures behind.

" Kit's coming down the beck ; he's brought the Herdwicks ! " she cried.

" Canny lad ! " said Railton, and leaning back limply, wiped his face. His forehead was wet with sweat, for he was weak and the suspense had been keen.

The sheep vanished behind a wall, and Lucy began to put fresh food on the table. Mrs. Railton hung a kettle on a hook above the fire and then turned with a start as a girl came into the porch.

" Miss Osborn ! " she exclaimed.

Grace advanced calmly, although there was some colour in her face, because she knew the others were surprised that she had come.

" Is Mr. Hayes here ? " she asked.

" Mayhappen he's at the pens," replied Lucy. " I thought I heard his car."

" Then I missed him at the cross-roads," said Grace. " I was going to Allerby, and my father asked me to give him a note when he stopped at Lawson's." She hesitated, and then resumed impulsively : " Perhaps I oughtn't to have come on ; but I wanted to do so."

They knew what she meant, but nobody answered, and Grace sat down on a bench by the table.

" Will you give the note to Mr. Hayes ? Has Kit Askew brought the Swinset sheep ? "

" He's coming now," said Lucy, picking up the note, and Grace's eyes sparkled.

" I knew he would bring them ; I told him he must."

Lucy went out and Grace asked Railton about his pains. While they talked somebody shouted outside, and the old man, getting up with an effort hobbled to the door.

" Hoad on ; dinna close t' pen," a man called. " Here's Kit and t' lot fra Swinset."

Three or four more shouted, and Grace, who had followed Railton, thought there was a note of triumph in their cries. Then dogs began to bark, somebody opened a gate, and a flock of Herdwicks, leaping out with wet fleeces shaking, and hoofs clicking on stone, ran across a shallow pool where the beck had overflowed.

A few minutes afterwards, Kit came in. He looked

tired, his face was rather haggard, and his clothes were wet. Tom, the shepherd, followed and sat down by the fire.

"It was nea an easy job, but we manished it," he said. "Swinset sheep is thief sheep, but they're none a match for Kit's oad dog."

Kit stopped abruptly as he crossed the floor and his heart beat. "Ah!" he said. "Miss Osborn?"

Grace smiled as she got up and gave him her hand. "Well done! Have you brought them all? But of course you have!"

"They're in the pen," Kit answered, with some embarrassment.

Then Railton stood up, leaning awkwardly on his stick. "I've misdoubted your new-fashioned plans, and ken that I was wrang. There's nea ither lad in aw t' dale could ha' browt Herdwicks doon Bleatarn ghyll last neet. Weel, t' oad ways for t' oad men, but I'se niver deny again that the young and new are good."

He sat down, and while Mrs. Railton began to bustle about the table Grace stole away. She knew she ought not to have come, and had done so with a feeling of rebellion against her father's harshness, although she tried to persuade herself that Hayes was most to blame. Now she was glad the note made a pretext for the visit; she had shown the Railtons her sympathy and had thanked Kit. After all, he had perhaps gone to look for the sheep because she told him; she rather hoped he had, and rejoiced with the others at his success.

Grace admitted that she liked Kit Askew. He was resolute but modest, and had just done a bold deed by which he had nothing to gain. Railton's praise had moved her, because she knew the dalesfolk's reserve and that the farmer would not, without good grounds, have spoken as he did.

Kit ate his breakfast, and soon afterwards Peter Askew came in and began to talk to Railton. Until the valuation was agreed upon there was nothing for them to do, and it was some time before the men returned from the pens. They were plain farmers with rather hard, brown faces, and stood about the fire in half-embarrassed silence while

Hayes sat down at the table and opened his pocket-book.

"We have made up the tally," he began, and Railton interrupted.

"Counting in the lambs and ewes fra Swinset?"

"They are counted," Hayes replied. "I'll give you particulars of the different lots."

He read out some figures and then turned to the group by the fire. "I think we are all agreed?"

"Aw, yis," said one. "It's as near as yan can mak' it, withoot sending flock to auction."

Hayes turned to Railton. "Are you satisfied?"

"We willunt fratch. Mayhappen two or three lots would fetch anither pound or two, but we'll ca' it fair."

"Then we must thank these gentlemen," said Hayes, who shut his pocket-book and took out a document. "As there is some other business and they have given us some time, we need not keep them."

The men looked at one another and Peter Askew said, "If Railton doesn't mind, we'd sooner stop."

"Stop if you like," Railton agreed. "You've got me a just reckoning and you're neebors aw."

"It's not necessary," Hayes objected. "The business we have to transact is private."

"They ken it," Railton replied in a stubborn voice. "I've bid them stop and the hoose is mine until Mr. Osborn turns me oot."

"Very well. You know the sum due to the landlord. Are you ready to pay?"

"I canna pay. It's weel you ken."

"Then, can you give security for the debt?"

"I canna and wadn't give it if I could. There's ways a cliver agent can run up a reckoning, and when you want Mireside I'll have to gan."

"Then, I'm afraid we shall be forced to break the lease and take measures to recover the sum due."

"Hoad on a minute!" said one of the group, who turned to Railton. "Would you like to stop?"

"I would like; I've lived at Mireside sin' I was born. There's another thing: it's none too good a time for a sale

o' farming stock, and when I've paid Osborn, I'll need some money to mak' anither start. Then mayhappen a dry spring would put me straight."

"It ought to; you're not much behind," Peter agreed. "Weel, you ken I'm generally willing to back my judgment, and noo it seems there's others think like me. Landlord canna break a lease when the tenant is ready to pay his fine."

"In a sense, the lease does not run out yet," Kit interposed. "It has rather reached the half-term, because by our custom Railton is entitled to take it up again for an equal period if he and the landlord agree about the necessary adjustments. Our leases really cover a double term."

Hayes turned to him with an ironical smile. "Do you know much about tenant law?" he asked.

"No," said Kit, rather dryly. "I made some studies when I could get the books, but they didn't take me far. In fact, I imagine that in this neighbourhood there's very little law and much precedent, which has generally been interpreted for the landlord's advantage. There are old Barony laws and Manor rights, and my notion is that nobody knows exactly how he stands. But we'll let this go. If Railton pays his fine, you will have some trouble to get rid of him."

Hayes agreed and Railton looked up with a puzzled air.

"But I canna pay," he said dully.

The farmer who had interrupted Hayes took out a bulky envelope and crossed the floor.

"Weel," he said, "I think you're wrang. Your friends have been talking aboot the thing and wadn't like t' see you gan." He gave Railton the envelope, adding: "It's a loan."

Railton's hand shook as he took out a bundle of bank-notes. "You're good neebors," he said in a strained voice. "But I dinna think I ought to tak' your money. There's a risk."

"Not much risk in backing an honest man," the other rejoined, and taking the notes from Railton gave them to Hayes. "Noo, if you'll count these——"

Hayes's face was inscrutable as he flicked over the notes.

" The total's correct. It's an awkward bundle ; a cheque would have been simpler."

" A cheque has the drawback that it must be signed," Kit remarked with a meaning smile. " We're modest folk, and nobody was anxious to write himself down the leader."

" I see ! " said Hayes. " I don't know if you're modest ; but you're certainly cautious."

" Anyhow, we're aw in this," said one of the others.

" So it seems. I hope you won't lose your money," Hayes rejoined and took out a fountain pen. " Well, here's your receipt, Mr. Railton. I don't think there is anything more to be said."

He put the receipt on the table and when he went away a farmer laughed.

" Oad Hayes is quiet and cunning as a hill fox, but my lease has some time to go and he canna turn us aw oot."

Railton tried to thank them, while Mrs. Railton smiled with tears in her eyes, but the dalesfolk dislike emotion and as soon as it was possible the visitors went away.

An hour or two afterwards Grace heard about the matter from the sick wife of a farmer, whom she had gone to see, and when she went home thought she had better not confess that she had taken Hayes's note to Mireside. When Osborn joined his wife and daughter at the tea-table in the hall after some disappointing shooting, his remark about his tenants were rancorous. Grace thought it prudent not to talk and left the table as soon as she could. When she had gone, Osborn frowned and, getting up, savagely kicked a log in the grate.

" I got a nasty knock this morning," he said. " It's not so much that I mind letting Railton stop ; I hate to feel I've been baffled and made the victim of a plot."

" After all, wasn't it rather Hayes's idea than yours that Railton ought to go ? " Mrs. Osborn ventured.

" It was ; there's some comfort in that ! You don't like Hayes much."

" I don't know that I dislike him. I'm not sure I trust him."

" Well," said Osborn thoughtfully, " I sometimes feel he's keenest about my interests when they don't clash with

his, and this last affair was a pretty good example of nepotism. For all that, his nephew would have been a better tenant and have paid a higher rent." He paused and knitted his brows angrily as he resumed: "However, it's done with, and one can't blame Railton for holding on to his lease. What I hate to feel is, the others plotted to baffle me. The land is mine, but I'd sooner get on well with my tenants."

"One cannot, so to speak, have it both ways," Mrs. Osborn remarked timidly.

"Oh, I know what you mean! But I don't think I'm a harsh landlord. If money was not quite so scarce, I might be generous. In fact, I don't know that I'd have agreed to turning Railton out if it hadn't been for Gerald's confounded debts and his allowance at Woolwich. That's a fresh expense."

"Well," Mrs. Osborn said, "you have got Railton's fine."

"It is not a large sum," Osborn answered with a frown. "I need the money, but in a sense I'd sooner it had not been paid. Anyhow, I'd sooner it had not been paid like that. The fellows' confounded organised opposition annoys me."

"Perhaps it was rather a mistake to give Bell the coal yards' lease."

"The coal yards had nothing to do with it," Osborn declared. "The trouble began earlier, and I've grounds for believing it began at Ashness. If I was rich enough, I'd buy the Askews out. They know I've no power over them and take advantage of the situation. The old man was a bad example for the others, but his son, with his raw communistic notions, is dangerous. If I could get rid of the meddling fool somehow, it would be a keen relief."

He came back to the table and picked up a cup of tea. Then, grumbling that it had gone cold, he put it down noisily and went out.

CHAPTER VIII

GRACE FINDS A WAY

SOON after the reckoning at Mireside, the snow melted off the fells and for a month dark rain clouds from the sea rolled up the dale. They broke upon the hill tops in heavy showers, grey mist drifted about the wet slopes, the becks roared in the ghylls, and threads of foam that wavered in the wind streaked the crags. In the bottom of the valley it was never really light, water flowed across the roads, and the low-standing farmsteads reeked with damp.

All this was not unusual and the dalesfolk would have borne it patiently had fuel not been short. Large fires were needed to dry the moisture that condensed in the flagged kitchens and soaked the thick walls, but coal could not be got at a price the housewives were willing to pay. Some would have had to stint their families in food had they bought on Bell's terms, and the rest struggled, for the common cause, against the mould that gathered on clothing and spoiled the meal. They grumbled, but their resolution hardened as the strain got worse, while Bell waited rather anxiously for them to give way.

His yards were full and more coal was coming in, but he saw that if he let the farmers beat him his power to overcharge them another time would be gone. The new combine was dangerous, since the co-operative plan might be extended to the purchase of chemical manures, seed, and lime. In the meantime, there was plenty of peat, stacked so that it would escape much damage, on Malton Head; but Askew and his friends could not get it down. Carts could not be used on the fells and the clumsy wooden sledges the farmers called stone-boats would not run across the boggy moor. The few loads Kit brought down at the cost of heavy labour were carried off by anxious housewives as soon as they arrived.

The weather was helping the monopolist, but he could

not tell if a change to frost would be an advantage or not. Although it would make the need for coal felt keenly, it might simplify the transport of peat. When Bell thought about it, and the colliery company's bills came in, he felt disturbed, but he was stubborn and would not lower his price yet.

At length the rain stopped, and after a heavy fall of snow keen frost began. The white fells glittered in cold sunshine that only touched the bottom of the dale for an hour or two. The ice on the tarn was covered, so that skating was impossible, and Thorn, feeling the need for amusement, had a few sledges made. He had learned something about winter sports in Switzerland, and one afternoon stood with a party of young men and women at the top of Malton Head. They had practised with a pair of ski farther down the hill, where one or two were sliding on a small Swiss luge, but Thorn wanted to find a long run for his Canadian-pattern toboggan.

Grace stood near him ; her face touched with warm colour and her eyes sparkling as she looked about. She did not altogether approve of Alan Thorn, but she was young and vigorous and enjoyed the sport. Besides, she loved the high fells and now they looked majestic in the pale sunshine. They were not all white ; dark rocks with glittering veins edged the snowfields, and the scarred face of Force Crag ran down where the shoulder of the moor broke off four hundred feet below. Where the sun did not strike, the snow was a curious delicate grey, and the bottom of the dale was coloured an ethereal blue. The pale-grey riband, winding in a graceful curve round the crag, marked the old green road that was sometimes used for bringing down dry fern, and Grace's face got thoughtful as she noted a row of men and horses some distance off. She imagined they were Askew and his helpers.

Thorn studied the girl with artistic satisfaction. He had an eye for female beauty and the girl looked very well in her rather shabby furs. Her pose was light and graceful, her figure finely modelled, and he liked the glow the cold had brought to her skin. Moreover, he liked her joyous confidence when they tried the luge on a risky slide. She

was as steady-nerved and plucky as a man, and was marked by a fine fastidiousness that did not characterise other girls he knew.

"I think this is about the best spot we have seen," he said. "The drop is steep but regular, although I expect we'll be breathless when we get to the bottom. Would you like to try? If not, perhaps somebody else will come."

He looked at the others, and they looked at the white declivity. It was much longer than any they had gone down, and a girl laughed.

"To begin with, we'll watch you. I was upset on the last slide and it's rather a long way to roll down to the dale."

Grace lay down on a cushion with her head just behind the toboggan's curved front; Thorn found room farther back, with his legs in the snow, and amidst some laughter and joking the others pushed them off. The surface was hard, and for a time the toboggan ran smoothly and steadily; then the pace got faster, and showers of snow flew up like spray. It beat into Grace's eyes and whipped her face, until she bent her head in the shelter of the curled front.

The sharp hiss the steel runners made was louder, the wind began to scream, and she got something of a shock when she cautiously looked up. It was hard to see through the snowy spray, but the top of the crag looked ominously near. Glancing down hill with smarting eyes, she thought the slope, which, from the top, had seemed to fall evenly to the dale, was also inclined towards the crag. She could not see much of the latter, but there was a fringe of dark rock where the white declivity broke off.

"Aren't we getting too near?" she shouted.

"Nearer than I thought," Thorn gasped. "Not sure I can swing the sledge. Can you get back and help?"

Grace braced herself. Alan's nerve was good, but there was a disturbed note in his voice; besides, he would not have asked her help unless it was needed. Wriggling back cautiously, she got level with Thorn, although there was not much room for them side by side. Her feet and the seam of her short dress brushed in the snow and tore up the surface. She felt the looser stuff beneath foam about her gaiters, but this was an advantage. The drag would help

to stop the sledge, and if she could put an extra pressure on one side, to some extent direct it. Still they were going very fast and at first she was nearly pulled off. She tightened her grasp with her hands until she felt her gloves split, and then risked another glance ahead.

The rocks were very close, but the sledge had passed the top, and she could see a few yards down the dark side as they followed the curving edge of the crag. The sledge was now running nearly straight down the hill, but the curve bent in towards them, and she could not tell if they would shoot past the widest spot or plunge over.

"Perhaps you had better let go," Thorn said hoarsely.

Grace shook her head. If she dropped off, it was uncertain whether she would stop until she had rolled some distance; perhaps she might not stop before she reached the edge of the crag. Anyhow, she did not mean to let go, and tried to catch the snow with her toes in an effort to help Thorn to steer the sledge. It swerved a little but rushed on again, and she saw that the edge of the rock curved in yet. She doubted if they were far enough off to get past the bend.

Then she saw that Thorn had slipped farther back in order to increase the drag on his legs. His face was dark with blood and she heard his heavy breathing as he tried to change their course. She helped all she could while the snow rolled across her dress, and then for a moment lifted her head. Powdered snow beat into her face and nearly blinded her, but she thought there was now an unbroken slant in front. They must have passed the middle of the bend, although Thorn was between her and the side on which it lay and she was not sure yet. She remembered with horrible distinctness how she had once stood at the bottom of the crag and seen a stone that rolled over the top smash upon the rocks.

"Try again!" Thorn gasped. "Swing her to the right!"

Grace let her body slip back. The thrust and drag were telling, for the sledge had swerved, and then there came a few seconds of keen suspense. After this she heard Thorn draw a laboured breath and felt his hand on her waist.

"We're past, Hitch yourself up before you're pulled off," he said.

With some trouble Grace got back to her place and lay still, while her heart thumped painfully and something rang in her ears. The reaction had begun and she knew she could not move if Thorn wanted help again. It however looked as if he did not, and some moments afterwards she saw that the way was clear ahead. She wondered whether they would stop before they reached the bottom of the dale and how far it was. The round sheepfold in the first field looked no larger than a finger ring. She was getting numb and the rush of bitter air took away her breath.

"Hold tight!" Thorn shouted presently and she noted that the hillside broke off not far in front.

Since there were no crags near the spot, it was obvious that they had come to an extra steep pitch, the brow of which prevented her from seeing the bottom. Next moment the sledge seemed to leave the ground and leap forward. Grace thought that for some yards they travelled through the air, and then the hiss of the runners that had suddenly stopped became a scream. The speed was bewildering and a haze of fine snow streamed past. By and by, however, this began to thin, the speed slackened, and Thorn gave a warning shout. She felt him try to turn the sledge, but they were going too fast; the light frame canted and turned over and they rolled off into the snow. When Grace got up and shook herself, fifty yards lower down, she saw Thorn standing by the righted sledge. He came to meet her as she toiled back and his eyes sparkled.

"By George!" he said, "you are fine. You're a thorough sport!"

Grace coloured. The compliment was obviously frank and not premeditated; perhaps she deserved it, but she did not want Thorn to praise her. His manners were good, but somehow he often jarred.

He was a big, handsome man, and it was, of course, ridiculous to dislike him because he was older than her and was getting fat. He was an amusing talker and a good sportsman, but now and then one got a hint of hardness and cunning. Somehow, so to speak, he did not ring true.

Grace noted that he was rather shaken, and felt vaguely disturbed. She had seen him following the foxhounds among the crags, for they hunt on foot in the rugged dales, and knew his steadiness and pluck. He had not been afraid for himself, and she did not want him to be afraid for her.

"After all," she said, "the hill seemed to run down evenly when we stood at the top. If the little slant towards the crag deceived you, it deceived me."

"I know more about toboganing and oughtn't to have been deceived. It hurts to feel I didn't take proper care of you."

"It really doesn't matter," Grace replied with a smile, and Thorn gave her a steady look.

"Oh, but it does matter! You ought to see that!"

"I don't see it," Grace insisted quietly, although her heart beat. "You were not accountable, and we got down quite safe. Let's talk about something else."

Thorn's eyes rested on her for another moment, and then he made a sign of acquiescence and they went back up the hill. At the top he marked a new line for the next day's sport, and then as the sun was getting low the party started home by the old stone-boat road. Near the bottom they overtook the Askews, and one or two others walking at their horses' heads as they cautiously descended a steep pitch. Grace noted that although they were not bringing much peat there was a risk of the sledges running down upon the teams.

"You have not got on very fast," she said to Peter.

"If we're no varra careful, we'll gan faster than we like."

"I suppose that's why you're only taking half a load?"

"Just that," Peter agreed. "It wadn't suit for load to run ower the team. Better safe than sorry, though it's a terrible loss o' time."

"Then, why don't you look for an easier way down?"

"There's only the oad green road. Fellside's ower steep for horses."

"Well, if I can think of a better way I'll tell you," Grace replied smiling, and hurried on after the others.

They left her at the Tarnside gate and she stopped abruptly as she went up the drive. It had obviously taken Askew

a long time to bring down half a load because of the risk to his horses; but she had found a better plan. It was not needful to use horses, after they had pulled the sledges up. The latter could be heavily loaded and left to run down alone. She must tell Kit Askew when she saw him next, but she did not reflect that it was curious she meant to tell Kit and not Peter.

CHAPTER IX

THE PLAN WORKS

ALTHOUGH the air was bracingly keen the afternoon was calm and the scattered clouds scarcely moved across the sky. The snow in the valley shone a delicate grey, and soft lights and shadows rested on the hills. A peak that rose above the edge of the lofty moor gleamed pale-yellow against a background of deep blue. Grace noted the tranquil beauty of the landscape, but hesitated now and then as she climbed the steep road out of the dale.

She had come to meet Kit Askew, and now she reviewed her reasons for doing so they did not look very sound. In fact, if Kit approved the plan she meant to suggest, she would perhaps be meddling unjustifiably with her father's business. After all, however, it was really not his business. He had allowed himself to be persuaded to help Hayes and the latter's accomplice, Bell, without quite understanding what this implied. Her plan would prevent his doing an injustice he did not really mean to do.

"I suppose you are going for some peat?" she said.

Kit said he was, and added that Peter and two or three neighbours were loading the stone-boats on the moor.

"Then, I wonder whether you could let me have a small quantity when you come down?"

"You can have a load if you want."

Grace laughed. "Two or three basketsful would be enough, and I don't want them for myself. I went to see Mrs. Waite and found her old father crippled by rheumatism. The kitchen was cold and damp, but she had a very little fire. She said her coal was nearly gone and she had got no peat."

"Thank you for telling me; I didn't know," said Kit. "I'll take her a sack as I go down the dale." He paused and hesitated, with his hand on the open gate. "But it's rather cold. Am I keeping you?"

Kit started his horses and they two went on together. By and by Grace resumed: "When I met you yesterday, your father said the sledges often ran down too fast and you could not put up a proper load."

"That is a drawback. You see, there's plenty peat cut; the trouble is to bring it down. After the heavy rain, we couldn't drag the stone-boats across the boggy moor, and although the snow has made this easy, it hasn't helped much otherwise. If we put up a big load, there's some danger of the sledges overtaking and knocking down the horses where the track is steep."

"And you can't see a way of getting over the difficulty?"

Kit said he could not, and Grace's eyes twinkled.

"Then I can. I'll show you a way, if you're not too proud to take advice from a girl."

"Certainly not," Kit said smiling. "I don't know why you think I'm proud."

"You're very cautious now," Grace rejoined. "You don't seem curious about my plan. Are you afraid it isn't practical?"

"No," said Kit, rather earnestly; "since it's yours, it's no doubt good." Then he pulled himself up and added with a twinkle: "But I haven't heard it yet."

"Well, while your difficulty is that the peat comes down too fast, I think it does not go fast enough. You are afraid about your horses, but you needn't use them. The stone-boats would run down alone. Do you understand now?"

Kit started. "I expect you have found the way, Miss Osborn, and we owe you some thanks. In fact, you're cleverer than the lot!"

"The admission doesn't seem to hurt you," Grace rejoined. "But I imagine, to feel you had to make it was something of a shock."

"No," said Kit, with a laugh she liked. "We're often dull and our womenfolk have helped us much. But somehow I did not expect——"

He stopped, and Grace gave him a level glance.

"You mean you did not expect help from me?"

"Well," he said, "I suppose I did mean something like that."

"Then I'm glad you owned it, because it allows me to clear the ground. I don't want poor people to be cold in winter in order that Bell may get rich. Neither does my father want it—you must believe this! He doesn't know all that goes on; Hayes hides things from him. There is no reason I shouldn't help you to spoil *Bell's* plot."

"Bell is our real antagonist and he's an awkward man to beat," he said. "However, the hint you have given us ought to be useful. I'll look for a way down when we get to the top."

Grace warned him about the inclination of the hillside to the rocks and stopped at the bottom of the crag.

"I think I'll go across the hill and watch the first sledge come down, if you're not too long," she said, and paused for a moment. "Perhaps you needn't tell the others it was my plan."

Kit said he would not do so and was strangely satisfied as he went on with his horses. He understood her hesitation; it was delightful to feel that she had given him her confidence and they shared a secret. At the top, he found the others had loaded the sledges and were ready to start. Since the dalesfolk are conservative, he had expected some opposition to his plan, but they listened attentively and an old man supported him.

There was some further talk and when they resolved to make the experiment Kit went down the hill. He said he wanted to see how the first sledge crossed an awkward pitch, but it counted for much that he saw a small figure below. Grace looked satisfied with his excuse for joining her and

they waited for a time while the men above moved the first load to the edge.

"It will be dark before they're ready if they're not quick," said Kit, and Grace looked up the hill.

"I think they're starting the sledge. If there had been nobody about, I would have liked to come down with the peat. You can't imagine how exciting it is."

They watched the sledge slip over the brow of the descent. It got larger as it came down, but it did not run as fast as the toboggan. One could see it rock and swerve, shaking off loose peats, where the ground was broken, and Grace glanced at the steep pitch Kit had come to watch.

"It will go down there with a splendid rush, but I don't think it will upset," she said. "My plan is going to work."

The sledge got nearer. They saw the snow fly up about its front and heard the scream the runners made. There was something fascinating about its smooth but fast descent, and as it approached the top of the dip they moved back rather unwillingly to let it pass. When it was nearly level with them it slowed on the changing incline and Grace noted that there was a narrow space between the back of the frame and the peat. She gave Kit a quick look as she said, "If one wanted, I think one could jump on."

"Let's try!" said Kit impulsively, and they ran forward.

He reached the sledge first, and throwing himself down held out his hand to Grace, who fell upon the runner log. Kit pulled her up and although the light was going saw her face glow after the effort she had made. Her eyes sparkled with excitement, but Kit felt half embarrassed because he did not know whether he had persuaded her to venture on an undignified adventure or she had persuaded him. It was a relief to hear her laugh.

"This is rather ridiculous, and I don't know if we can hold on," she said as she tried to grasp the shaking peat.

The sledge ran faster and lurched violently as it plunged over the edge of the steep drop. A shower of peat fell on them, the speed got furious, and they heard the runners scream, but they were sheltered from the rush of wind and could not see ahead. After a few moments Grace looked up with twinkling eyes.

"You could drop off if you liked. Are you sorry you came?"

"No," said Kit. "I came because I wanted, and now I'm here I'll stop."

"I really think you mean to be nice," Grace rejoined with amusement and Kit understood; she saw he did not mean to admit that she had suggested the adventure, but this was not important. It was something of an adventure for a girl like Miss Osborn, although her having embarked on it gave him a delightful feeling of partnership in a harmless folly.

"I hope there's nothing in the way," he said. "We're going very fast and Hindbeck farm can't be far off. I ought to have looked before we jumped."

"It is too late now," Grace answered with an excited laugh. "I imagine you're not as cautious as you think; but we won't talk. It's hard to hold on and I haven't much breath."

Kit moved nearer and, seizing the edge of the frame, put his arm round her waist. She did not seem to resent this, and for a time they sped down hill with their feet ploughing through the snow. Kit did not care how long the swift rush lasted, but by and by he began to get anxious. The sledge had gone a long way since they jumped on, and the hillside was steep to the bottom, where it met the Hindbeck pastures. While he wondered whether Grace would slide far and get shaken if he made her let go, the sledge tilted up. It stopped with a violent shock, he heard stones fall, and was thrown off amidst a shower of peat. When he got up Grace was sitting in the snow some distance off and he ran towards her. She had lost her small fur cap and her hair was loose, but to his relief she laughed.

"Oh," she said, "it really was ridiculous! But the plan will work. The peat will run down!"

"That is so," Kit agreed, with a breathless chuckle. "I think it would have run into the Hindbeck kitchen but for the wall."

"Then it was a wall that stopped us. It felt like a rock."

"Come and see," said Kit, holding out his hand to help her up.

"I think," she said, "I'd rather you looked for my hat."

He went off and it was two or three minutes before he found the hat among the scattered peat. When he came back it was nearly dark, but Grace's hair was no longer untidy, and the snow that had smeared her clothes had gone. She walked with him to where the sledge rested on a pile of stones, and looking through the gap, they saw a woman with a lantern cross a narrow pasture between them and a house.

"What's t' matter?" the woman shouted and turned round. "Janet, gan on and see what's brokken t' wa'."

Another figure came out of the gloom and Grace looked at Kit.

"I don't know who Janet is, but I do know Mrs. Creighton. She talks," she said. "If you'll stop and explain matters, I'll go down the lonning. It was a glorious adventure! Good night!"

She stole away round the corner of the wall, and Kit, who understood that he was, so to speak, to cover her retreat, waited until the two women came up. The one who carried the lantern was fat and homely; the other was slender and looked like Janet Bell.

"It's Kit, an' stane-boat stucken in t' wa'!" said the first as she held up the light. "But where's team? An' hoo did you get here? There's nea road this way."

Kit laughed. "It's lucky I left the horses at the top. This is a new plan for bringing down the peat and it certainly works, although next time we must try to stop a little sooner."

Mrs. Creighton asked him some questions before she understood what had happened. He was in the light, because she had put the lantern on the wall, and although he could not see her companion's face, he suspected from Janet's quietness that she was studying him.

"Then you left the others on the moor," the girl remarked.

"I did," said Kit. "We sent the stone-boat off by itself, and it was half-way down when I jumped on."

"Then none of the men came with you?"

"No," said Kit, who felt annoyed because he saw Janet suspected something. "I went down to watch the sledge and see if we had hit the best track."

"It's strange!" said Janet. "I thought there was somebody else when I first came out. Still, of course, it was nearly dark."

Kit was puzzled because he could not tell how much Janet had really seen, and thought the situation needed careful handling. If she knew Miss Osborn had been with him, it would be a mistake to make the thing look significant by pretending that she had not; but it was possible that Janet did not know. Then Grace had hinted that she did not want their adventure talked about.

"I don't expect you could see very well if you had just come out from the light in the kitchen," he replied. "Anyhow, none of the men came with me and I must go back and tell them not to send off another lot. We'll see about mending your wall to-morrow, Mrs. Creighton."

He went off to a gate that opened into the lonning. This was the wisest plan, because he did not want to talk to Janet. He was half afraid of her, but not because he thought she sympathised with her father's plots; it was known that Bell and his daughter quarrelled. The girl was a dangerous coquette and had tactfully hinted that she rather approved Kit. This had alarmed Kit, who knew she was clever and resolute.

When he reached the lane he stopped abruptly as he remembered something, and took out his pipe, alhough he did not mean to smoke. He must be cautious, since he was not sure if Janet had gone in. Striking a match, he held it between his hands as if were going to light his pipe and stooped in the shelter of a wall.

The light shone on the ground and he knitted his brows as he saw sharp footsteps in the snow. The farm people did not wear boots that would leave marks like these; moreover, the footsteps would lead anybody who thought it worth while to follow them to the spot where the sledge upset. Kit threw down the match, and frowned as he went on again

CHAPTER X

JANET MEDDLES

BRIGHT moonlight sparkled on the snow when Kit left Ashness to post some letters he had written, ordering new machines. He was young, but since he came home Peter had allowed much of the business of the farm to fall into his hands. Kit's judgment was sound; he had studied modern methods at the agricultural college and was progressive without being rash.

Peter knew Kit was satisfied to stop at Ashness; but, for all that, if the lad felt he wanted a wider field for his energies later, he would not stand in his way. The time might come when he must let him go, for Peter had a brother who had got rich in America and was willing to give his nephew a start. Indeed, Adam had written again, not long since, asking if Peter was going to send him. It was a relief when Kit laughed and declared that he did not mean to leave Ashness yet.

When he passed Allerby mill Kit looked about. Icicles covered the idle wheel, a snow cornice hung over the flagged roof, and water splashed softly in the half-frozen race. Farther on, the snowy road was checkered by the shadows of hedges and bare trees. Low roofs, touched by hoar-frost, rose behind the trunks, and here and there a gleam of yellow light shone out. The road, however, was empty, as Kit was relieved to note.

He had once or twice recently, when he went to the post in the evening, met Janet Bell coming from the little shop in the village. In fact, the thing began to look significant. Kit was sorry for Janet, because Bell's rule was harsh and his neighbours extended their dislike for him to his family. All the same, Kit did not trust the girl and would sooner she left him alone. He might be taking too much for granted, but romantic pity was a treacherous guide. Janet was pretty and clever, and he was human. He

had thought about changing the time he went to the post, but felt it would be cowardly. Besides, he was occupied all day and letters could not be written until the outside work was done, while a postman called at Allerby early in the morning.

There was, however, nobody about, and for a minute or two Kit went on at a quick pace. He passed Bell's house, and then hesitated with a frown as a figure he thought he knew came round a bend in front. Close by the tall hedgerow was broken by a stile, from which a path led across a field and joined the road farther on. He was in the moonlight and if he vanished the thing would look too marked. Moreover, there would be something ridiculous about his running away.

Kit went forward, wondering whether Janet had noted his hesitation, and she stopped him near a big ash-tree. The shadow of the branches made a black, open pattern on the snow and a belt of gloom lay behind the wide trunk. Kit would sooner Janet had stopped in the moonlight, since the villagers often went to the shop and post in the evening, and his standing in the shadow gave a hint of secrecy to the accidental meeting. He thought it strange that Janet did not see this.

"You were walking fast," she said. "I believe you'd have gone by if I hadn't spoken."

"The frost is sharp enough to make one move briskly and I've something to do when I get back."

"Busy lad!" said Janet, in a mocking voice. "You're always in a hurry, Kit. I suppose Peter works you hard?"

"He says I work him harder than he likes," Kit replied smiling. "Perhaps the truth is he lets me have my way."

"You're lucky," Janet remarked with a sigh. "It's nice to be able to do what you like. There's only one way at the Mill house, and that's father's. But I suppose you agree with him that women's ideas don't count?"

"I dare say their ideas are as sound as ours, but I don't know much about it. We have no women except old Bella and the dairymaid at Ashness."

"And you never miss them? In that big, lonely house!"

"Oh, well," he said, "we're out all day and when we come home there are letters to write and books to read."

"Letters and books!" said Janet. "Kit, I wonder if you're quite alive." Then she laughed provocatively. "Anyhow, you don't seem to know when you're given a chance of being nice."

Kit did not answer and wished she would let him go. He felt awkward and thought Janet knew this, for she resumed: "However, one mustn't expect too much and you want to get back. It's a habit of yours. You were in a hurry to get away the last time I saw you, when the stone-boat broke Creighton's wall."

"I'd been at work since morning in the snow."

"And Miss Osborn was waiting for you in the lonning?"

"No," said Kit sharply; "she was not."

"Anyhow she was with you, before she stole away."

"She didn't steal away," Kit began indignantly, but hesitated. Now he came to think about it, Grace had gone as quietly as possible.

"You mean Miss Osborn does nothing undignified? For all that, she didn't want Mrs. Creighton to see her. I don't suppose Osborn would be pleased to know his daughter and you went for moonlight walks on the fells."

Kit knew Osborn would not like it, and since the dalesfolk are fond of gossip saw he must stop the story going round.

"I had not gone for a walk with Miss Osborn. I met her as I came down from the moor. She didn't know I was coming."

"So she wasn't waiting for you?" Janet remarked, with a hint of mockery. She stopped, and putting her hand on Kit's arm, pushed him nearer the hedgerow as a man and woman came round a neighbouring corner.

Kit was annoyed, but he waited and watched the people as they passed. The shadow was not very dark and he thought the woman gave him a curious glance. He knew her and imagined that she knew him. When the people went through a gate Janet laughed.

"That was very unlucky, Kit! Old Nanny's fond of talking; I'm afraid your character is gone."

Kit frowned. He did not see much humour in the situation, although Janet was amused.

"Oh," she said, "you are dull! I expect you couldn't be nice if you tried. But we were talking about Miss Osborn. You were not riding on the stone-boat when you met her. I don't suppose you could have stopped it."

"No," said Kit shortly, "I was not."

"But I saw you and somebody else hardly a minute after the stone-boat hit the wall."

"You saw *me*."

"I did," said Janet. "The snow was sticking to your clothes as if you had fallen, and you looked angry when Mrs. Creighton put the lantern on the wall." She paused for a moment, and went on: "I begin to see: you did come down on the stone-boat and Miss Osborn came with you. You were both thrown off by the upset at the wall. Well, if you persuaded her to join you in an adventure like that, it looks as if you were pretty good friends."

Kit said nothing. In a sense, Miss Osborn had persuaded him, and it was difficult to explain that both had really given way to a rash impulse. Somewhat to his surprise, Janet gently touched his arm.

"Be careful, Kit! I wouldn't like to see you hurt. Miss Osborn's friends are not your kind of folk; she only wants to amuse herself when they are not about."

"That's ridiculous," Kit declared. "Miss Osborn is not amusing herself with me."

"Perhaps you ought to know," Janet rejoined with some dryness. "Now I come to think of it, you're not always very bright. Anyhow, when she finds the game tiresome, she'll soon get rid of you."

"I meet Miss Osborn now and then and sometimes she stops and speaks. That is all," Kit said sternly.

"I imagine it's enough," Janet remarked. "Well, I don't want to see you made to look a fool; you're rather a good sort, Kit, if you're not very clever. Be careful and remember you have been warned."

She gave him a friendly nod and went off, but after a few moments turned and looked back. Kit was walking down the road with swift angry strides. Janet smiled,

but when she entered the mill-house kitchen her face was flushed. Soon after she sat down by the fire, Bell came in and leaned against the table with an angry frown.

"There's two mair trucks o' coal, and I canna find room for t' stuff," he said. "Yards is full and I only sold three or four car loads last week."

Janet knew silence was prudent when her father was disturbed, but he had given her a lead. Kit was a fool, and although she doubted if he were as dull as he pretended, she was angry with him. Anyhow, it might be possible to stop his ridiculous infatuation for Miss Osborn.

"You can't sell coal when the Askews are giving peat away," she said.

"Looks like that," Bell agreed. "I'd ha' broke the others before noo if I hadn't had Peter and Kit against me. Hooiver, if I canna sell coal, I canna pay the rent and landlord will have to do something. Mayhappen it will be easier for him if he kens the Askews started the plot. Osborn's none too fond of them."

"He wouldn't like them any better if he knew what I know," Janet remarked, with a malicious smile.

"What do you ken about them?" Bell asked scornfully.

"I don't imagine Osborn wants Kit for his son-in-law."

Bell started and then laughed harshly.

"Old wives' crack! Kit's not such a fool!"

"You know best," said Janet. "If you like, I'll tell you what I've seen."

She did so, and Bell's mean face got thoughtful. On the whole, Janet did not exaggerate much, although she now and then made a rather unwarranted implication. She threw a fresh light on matters the gossips already talked about; among others were Grace's visit to Mireside the morning Railton's sheep were counted and her meeting with Kit before he went to look for the Herdwicks. When she stopped Bell knitted his brows.

"If it was used right, I might mak' some use o' this," he observed. "We'll see what Osborn says about coal yards and the alterations at mill."

He went to his office and Janet sat quietly by the fire. Her plot would work; Miss Osborn should not have Kit.

Bell made some calculations. It looked as if he must meet them and he wrote a notice that coal would be delivered by the trailer lurry at a reduction of two-and-six a ton.

When he had put this in an envelope for the printers, Bell knitted his brows. Although his neighbours would sooner burn coal than peat, he was not sure the reduction would stimulate the demand for the former and he must look for relief in some other direction. He paid a high rent for the yards and the landlord ought to help. Osborn would, no doubt, be reluctant, but he might be forced. Bell's lease of the mill would soon run out ; nobody else could pay as much as he paid, and he would demand certain expensive alterations. Furthermore, Osborn did not like the Askews, and Bell imagined he saw how to strike a blow at Kit ; Janet had shown him the way. It would be some satisfaction to punish the meddlesome fellow.

Two days afterwards the notice was fixed on the gate-posts, but a week went by without its attracting fresh customers. Then a bill from the colliery arrived and Bell put down his price another two-and-six. He resolved to wait until the week was out and then, if needful, get Hayes to arrange for a meeting with Osborn.

On the last evening of the week, a number of the co-operators met in the kitchen at Ashness and for a time talked about the weather and the price of sheep. Askew let them talk and Kit was too preoccupied to give them a lead. He had been thoughtful since he met Janet Bell, for she had banished the self-deception he had unconsciously used and thrown a new and disturbing light on his friendship with Grace. Ridiculous as it was in many ways, he was falling in love with Grace Osborn. Moreover, he had met her an hour since and she had talked with a friendly confidence that made his heart beat. The girl liked and trusted him, and although he durst not look for more, this was much. It was plain that he ought to conquer his infatuation, but he doubted if he could.

Listening to the others mechanically, he was silent and absorbed until one asked, " Weel, what's to be done aboot coal noo ? Are we gan t' buy ? "

" I dinna ken," said another. " My womenfolk are

grumelling an' it's lang sin' we had good light bread, but they're none for letting Bell have his way."

"He's come doon five shillings, and we've peat enough to fall back on if he puts up price again," somebody else remarked. "Hooiver, I reckon he's forced to sell and we might get anither half-croon off if we wait."

Peter took his pipe from his mouth. "It's a kittle point. T' womenfolk have been patient and Bell canna rob us much if we buy from him noo. Aw t' same, we can beat him doon some shillings if we hoad on."

"Then hoad on and break the grasping skin-flint!" said one of the younger men.

"I doot if we can break him and wadn't say it's wise to try. If he'll come doon anither shilling, I think we might tak' his coal. That wad be a just price and we ought to be satisfied."

"Let him smart!" urged the other. "He's robbed us lang enough."

"Weel," said Peter thoughtfully, "I dinna ken if that's a reason for robbing him, and it's sometimes safer no to push your enemy over hard when he's willing to give in. You must choose. If you hoad on and force him to sell at a big loss, the fight can only end in yan o' two ways. He'll mak' you pay top price for cattle food, lime and patent manures; or you'll drive him oot o' dale. You must reckon if you're strong enough."

"We'll hear what Kit says," one of the rest remarked.

Kit's mood was hardly normal. He was not often rash, but he felt sore and rebellious and this had a stronger influence than he knew. Miss Osborn liked him, but her father's rank and traditions were daunting obstacles. Kit felt this was unjust, and raw passions and prejudices that he was, as a rule, too sensible to indulge, got the mastery.

"My father is right," he said. "We have started a fight with Bell; he's a dangerous man to rouse and will make us pay, unless we beat him. Besides, he has made some pay already. Old rheumatic men and young children starved by half-empty grates when the snow stopped us getting the peat, and you have seen the profits you worked hard for melt before the price Bell charged for cattle-meal.

He's been getting greedier, until he imagined he could rob us as he liked, and since he has forced us into the quarrel, my notion is we ought to fight it out."

Peter looked surprised, but did not speak, and there was silence for a few moments. Then one said:

"I'm with Kit. We'll hoad on until Bell comes doon seven-and-six. If he does, we'll talk aboot it again."

After some argument, the rest agreed, and when they went away Peter turned to his son.

"Mayhappen you've sent them t' right road, but I dinna ken! I'm none fond o' fratching, unless I'm forced."

"We are forced," Kit answered moodily.

Peter gave him a keen glance and then spread out his hands.

"It's possible. For aw that, it wadn't ha' done much harm to give t' man his chance o' makin' peace."

Kit did not answer, but went out, and Askew sat by the fire with a thoughtful look. Something had happened to the lad, and Peter wondered what it was. He felt vaguely disturbed, but could see no light.

CHAPTER XI

OSBORN'S PRIDE GETS HURT

SOON after the farmers met at Ashness, Bell, feeling sore and resentful, sat one evening in the Tarnside library. Osborn, after fixing a time for his visit, had kept him waiting twenty minutes, and Bell, had come to think himself a man of no little importance. The spacious library was very cold and the end of a small log smouldered among the ashes in the grate. Bell knew he had been brought into the library because it was Osborn's business room; but the latter might have ordered the fire to be made up.

His neglect rankled, although Bell had something else to think about. He had lowered his price for coal another

shilling, without attracting buyers, and now admitted that the dalesfolks' resistance was getting dangerous. To some extent, the Askews were accountable for this, but Osborn got a large share of the profit Bell had hoped to make. One did not pay a high rent for nothing. By and by Bell looked at Hayes, who stood by the hearth.

"The next time I come to Tarnside Mr. Osborn will wait for me," he remarked.

Hayes made a warning gesture, there were steps in the passage, and Osborn came in. He sat down at the end of the table and looked at his watch.

"I can give you about a quarter of an hour," he said. "Perhaps we had better begin."

The big room was nearly dark, but the men sat in the light a shaded lamp threw across the table. Osborn looked half bored and half impatient, Hayes was urbanely inscrutable, while Bell's mean face was marked by greed.

"Mr. Bell finds his stock of coal accumulating faster than he likes," said Hayes. "He must pay on delivery, and since his customers have combined against him, feels he's entitled to some relief."

"I don't see how that is my business," Osborn rejoined. "Bell might get over the difficulty by lowering his price."

"I've putten it doon," Bell broke in. "The price I can sell at is fixed by my rent."

"To some extent, the argument is logical," said Hayes.

"Then am I to understand that Mr. Bell expects me to reduce his rent?"

"Not to begin with," Hayes answered, giving Bell a warning glance. "He imagines he might gain his object almost as well if we stopped Askew cutting peat."

"You cannot stop him. The peat is his."

"We might embarrass him. While the snow lasts, it saves some awkward labour to cross Creighton's field and use his lonning. A tenant is not entitled to grant a way-leave."

"Allowing a friend to use the lane for a week or two can hardly be called a way-leave."

"Well, although Askew owns the moor, it's doubtful if he is entitled to remove peat for sale, unless by arrangement

with the lord of the manor. I have seen Sir Gordon's agent and he is not unwilling to dispute the point."

"At my cost?" said Osborn with a sarcastic smile. "Enforcing the old manorial rights, which nobody knows much about, would be an expensive business, and I have no money to risk. However, if Bell is willing to pay the lawyers——"

"I'll pay nowt but rent. It's high enough," Bell declared.

Osborn shrugged. "Very well! It would cost too much to try to frighten Askew off. He's confoundedly shrewd and obstinate."

Bell was silent for a few moments, but his face got hard as he fixed his eyes on Osborn.

"There's another matter. T' mill lease will soon fall in and I canna tak' it on again, unless I get the repairs and improvements done. Mr. Hayes has t' list."

The agent took out the list with some builders' and millwrights' estimates, and Osborn frowned as he studied the documents. It was obvious that Bell meant to use pressure.

"I don't like to be threatened," he replied.

"It's not a threat," said Bell, with a cunning smile. "If I'm to lose my money at coal yards, I must earn some at mill, but unless I get t' repairs and new machines, mill willunt pay to run." He paused and studying Osborn's face resumed: "There'll be nea peace for either o' us while the Askews gan aboot makin' trouble."

"I suppose that is so, to some extent," Osborn agreed.

"Then is it fair to leave me to fratch wi' them? After aw, they're mair your enemies than mine."

"I don't understand you; I have no coal to sell."

Bell looked up with a sour grin. "There's worse ways o' hurting a proud man than touching his pocket. If you dinna ken what's going on, it's time you watched young Kit. I'll say nea mair, but aw t' oad wives are cracking and you can ask Mr. Hayes. He kens!"

Osborn's face got red, but he gave Bell a haughty look.

"Anything that touches me personally is my private concern—and we are talking about the lease of the mill.

I cannot make all the improvements you ask for, but perhaps something can be done. When we have studied the matter Mr. Hayes will let you know."

Bell got up and when he went out Osborn turned to Hayes. "What did the fellow mean? He said you knew!"

"It's dangerous ground and I frankly wish he'd told you to ask somebody else. However, there is some gossip——"

"Go on," said Osborn sternly. "Whom are they gossiping about?"

"Miss Osborn, since you insist."

Osborn clenched his fist and the veins rose on his forehead as he said, "And young Askew?"

Hayes made a sign of agreement and Osborn, getting up, walked across the floor. He came back with a savage sparkle in his eyes and stood in front of Hayes.

"Tell me what you know."

With a pretence of reluctance, Hayes obeyed. He was tactful and apologetic, but he made it plain that the girl was in Kit's confidence.

Osborn stopped him with a savage gesture. His face was deeply flushed and his voice was hoarse as he said: "That is enough. The thing looks impossible! I must try to find out what foundation there is for the ridiculous tale."

"I shall be relieved if you do find it is ridiculous," said Hayes, who went off soon afterwards.

For some minutes Osborn leaned against the mantel with his hands clenched. He had declared the thing impossible, but he feared it was true. Hayes had been very clear about her visit to Railton's, and her coming down Malton Head on Askew's sledge was ominous. She must have been strongly attracted by Kit since she had done a thing like that. Besides, she had obviously sympathized with, and perhaps helped, his plans. This was treachery, because it was a tradition of the Osborns that they stood together.

By and by he heard voices in the hall and braced himself. He must go down to receive his guests and was glad that they had come, since he did not want to tell his wife about

the matter yet ; in fact, he did not think he would talk to Grace. The thing was humiliating, and there was a possibility that Hayes had been mistaken. Osborn resolved to watch the girl and then insist on a reckoning if she gave him grounds for doing so.

He went down and carried out his hospitable duties. Next morning he arranged for a day's shooting ; the snow had nearly gone and there were a few pheasants left in Redmire wood. The party started early, taking their lunch, and in the afternoon Grace left Tarnside and walked down the dale. She had no particular object, but the day was fine and she wondered whether Kit had brought all the peat from Malton Head.

There was no wind and the frost was not keen. Grey clouds trailed across the sky, that was touched with yellow in the west, and soft, elusive lights played about the dale. Patches of snow on the fellsides gleamed and faded ; mossy belts glowed vivid green, red berries in the hedgerows shone among withered leaves and fern, and then the light passed on and left the valley dim. Something in its calm beauty reacted on the girl and made her thoughtful. She loved the dale and felt that she might be happy there if it were not for her father's poverty and overbearing temperament.

After all, they were not really poor ; they had had enough to satisfy their needs. Their clinging to out-of date traditions caused the strain. One gained nothing by pretending to be rich and important ; there was no logical reason for trying to live like one's ancestors, and the effort cost the Osborns much. It meant stern private economy, public ostentation, and many small deceits. Grace was getting tired of this pretence ; she wanted something simpler and dignified.

Grace blushed as she thought of Alan Thorn and contrasted him with Kit. She did not want to marry yet ; but perhaps, if Kit were not a working farmer's son—— She pulled herself up, with a smile, for it looked as if she had not broken free from the family traditions. What did it matter if Kit were a farmer's son ? He was honest and generous ; he had a well-modelled figure, bright eyes, and a clean brown skin. But since Kit was not her lover, she

was indulging in idle sentiment ; and then she admitted that he might love her, although she did not yet love him. Indeed if she must be honest, the thing was possible—she had seen his face brighten and remarked his satisfaction when they met.

Then she stopped abruptly as she saw him coming down the road. There was a path across a field close by, but it would be admitting too much if she tried to avoid him, and she went on. Kit came up, dressed in rough working clothes, with muddy leggings, and a hedge-stick in his hand. Two dogs ran before him and it looked as if he had been driving sheep. Grace was very calm when he took off his cap and he thought the hint of stateliness he sometimes noted was rather marked. It did not daunt him ; he felt it was proper Grace should look like that. She noted that he was hot and breathless.

" I saw you as I was bringing the sheep down Burton ghyll," he said.

" Then you must have good eyes," Grace remarked. " It's a long way, and I don't wear conspicuous clothes."

Kit laughed. " I'd have known you much farther off. There's nobody in the dale who walks like you."

Grace gave him a quiet glance that he met without embarrassment. She saw that he had not meant to offer her a cheap compliment ; yet the compliment was justified. A dancing master had told her that she walked and carried herself well.

" But where are the sheep ? " she asked.

" I left them in the field at the beckfoot," he answered with a touch of awkwardness. " We can bring them down afterwards ; I remembered I wanted something at Allerby."

Grace turned her head to hide a smile. It was obvious that he had remembered he wanted to go to Allerby when he saw her.

" Oh, well," she said, " I am going part of the way. However, I mustn't stop you if you want to get back to the sheep."

" It isn't at all important," Kit declared. Then he paused and Grace thought he was studying his old and

rather muddy clothes. "But, of course," he resumed, "it's possible you'd sooner go on alone."

She laughed. "Don't be ridiculous, Mr. Askew! I think you know what I mean. I didn't want to keep you from your work."

He looked relieved. "Yes. Although I'm not very clever at this sort of thing, I generally do know what you mean. I can't tell if it's strange or not."

"It certainly is not worth while puzzling about. I expect I'm rather obvious—for that matter, so are you."

"Frankness often saves you some trouble and I don't know if it gives your opponent the advantage some folks imagine. However, it's not our rule in the dale to say all we feel."

"It's not Bell's, for example. How is the coal campaign getting on?"

"Well," said Kit, thoughtfully, "so far as that goes, I believe we have beaten him. There's a new notice that lowers the price seven-and-six altogether, and last night we advised folks to buy. But I don't know if the fight's over. Bell may find another way of putting on the screw."

"I hope he will give it up," Grace replied. "I tried to help, because I felt I must; but of course you see I can't help again."

Kit made a sign of understanding. "Yes; you showed us how to bring the peat down. Now I don't know what to say. It's awkward ground."

They were silent for some time afterwards, for both had said enough and knew that Osborn's resentment must be reckoned on. It made them feel like accomplices and drew them together. They were young and not given to looking far ahead, but they saw the threat that the friendship both valued might be broken off.

By and by three or four reports rang through the calm air and Grace came near to stopping, but did not. She had forgotten Osborn was shooting in Redmire wood and she and Kit must pass its edge. For all that, she could not turn back. Kit would guess why she did so; it would be an awkward admission that she was afraid of being seen with him by Osborn or his friends. She was afraid, but

she was proud, and went on, hoping that Kit had not noted her hesitation. He had not, but was puzzled by her resolute and half-defiant look.

The guns were silent when they came to the wood, which rolled down the hillside below the road. Here and there a white birch trunk and a yellow patch of oak-leaves shone among the dark firs ; the beech hedge was covered by withered brown foliage. A belt of grass ran between the wood and road and Grace took the little path along its edge. Her feet made no noise and her tweed dress harmonised with the subdued colouring of dead leaves and trunks. The light was not good and she thought she would not be visible a short distance off ; besides the sportsmen might be at the other side of the wood. She hoped they were, since she vaguely perceived that if Osborn saw her it would force a crisis she was not yet ready to meet. Then her thoughts were disturbed, for somebody in the wood shouted : " Mark cock flying low to right ! "

A gunshot rang out close by and a small brown bird, skimming the top of the hedge, fluttered awkwardly across the road. Next moment dry twigs rustled and a young man leaped on to the grass with a smoking gun in his hand. As he threw it to his shoulder, Kit ran forward and struck the barrel. There was a flash and while the echoes of the report rolled across the wood a little puff of smoke floated about the men. Grace stood still, trembling, for she knew she had run some risk of being shot.

" Why don't you look before you shoot ? " Kit shouted in a strange, hoarse voice. " You've no business to use a gun on a public road. It's lucky I was quick."

" That is so ; my fault ! " gasped the other, who took off his cap as he turned to Grace. " Very sorry, Miss Osborn ; didn't see you. Wanted to get the woodcock. Hope you're not startled much."

Grace forced a smile. She had physical courage and was rather shaken by what she saw in Kit's face than the risk she had run. Kit looked strangely white and strained. He had obviously got a bad shock, but she thought he would not have looked like that had he saved anybody else from the other's gun.

"My dress is hard to see against the trees. You really needn't be disturbed," she said.

The young man renewed his confused apologies, and when he pushed through the hedge and they went on again Grace looked at Kit. He had not got his colour back, his lips were set and his gaze was fixed. The shock had broken his control and brought her enlightenment. He loved her, but she needed time and quietness to grapple with the situation. Her heart beat and her nerves tingled; she could not see the line she ought to take. Yet he must be thanked.

"You were very quick," she said as calmly as possible, although she was conscious of a curious pride in him. "Somehow I knew if there was need for quickness you would act like that. I believe I was stupid enough to stand still until you jumped. Well, of course, you know I thank you——"

She stopped, for Kit who turned his head for a moment turned it back and looked straight in front. He durst not trust himself to speak, and they went on silently.

CHAPTER XII

OSBORN INTERFERES

WHEN Grace and Kit had gone a short distance they heard voices and a rattle of sticks in the wood, but the noise got fainter and she imagined the beaters were moving the other way. Ferrars, who shot at the woodcock, had probably not had time to tell Osborn about his carelessness, and it looked as if nobody else had been posted near the road. This was something of a relief, but Grace felt anxious. A gate not far off led to a drive in the wood, and she thought she had heard Osborn's voice.

She kept on the belt of grass, which got narrower, so that the path ran close to the hedge. On the opposite side, a

clump of silver-firs threw a shadow across the road, and a patch of pale-yellow sky shone behind an opening in the trees. The stiff fir branches cut sharply against the glow, but where she and Kit were the light was dim. For all that, she stopped abruptly when a man came out of the wood and turned, as if to look up the road. It was Osborn and she thought she knew for whom he was looking.

Grace's judgment failed her. She pushed Kit towards the beech hedge and they stepped into a small hollow among the withered leaves. Kit, like Grace, had not had time for thought, but as Osborn, looking straight in front, went past, he felt he had done wrong. For one thing, it was rather shabby to hide and his doing so reflected on his companion. The feeling got stronger as Osborn went up the road, and Kit was sorry he had given way to a cowardly impulse. Yet since he had hidden, he must wait.

After a few moments, Grace turned her head and Kit saw her face was flushed. It was obvious that she felt much as he felt. She had prompted him to hide, but she had done so in sudden alarm and he ought to have kept cool and thought for both, particularly since it was getting plain that Osborn was looking for them. The latter stopped, hesitated, and came back, and Grace turned sharply to Kit. Her look was strained, but he got a hint of haughtiness and resolve. He made a sign that he understood and knew he had done well when he moved back from the hedge. A moment's hesitation would have cost him the girl's respect. They waited in the road and Kit's heart beat fast, but not with fear.

Osborn stopped a yard or two off and looked at them with sternly controlled rage.

"It's obvious that I passed you just now," he said.

"You did; I ought to have stopped you," Kit agreed. "For a moment, it did not strike me that you were looking for Miss Osborn."

Osborn glanced at the hollow in the hedge. "It's curious you stopped at a spot where there was not much chance of your being seen."

Grace turned, as if she meant to speak, but Kit resumed:

"I don't know that you are entitled to question what I do on a public road."

"Certainly not," said Osborn, with forced quietness. "I have, however, a right to question my daughter's choice of her acquaintances, and it looks as if I had some grounds for using my authority." He paused and turned to Grace. "Your mother is waiting for you. You had better go home."

Grace hesitated, glancing at Kit. It was her fault that they had hidden and she would have waited had she thought he wanted her. Kit's face, however, was hard and inscrutable, and with something of an effort she went away. It was a relief to Kit that she had gone; he had meant to keep her out of the quarrel and now he was ready to talk to Osborn.

"The matter doesn't end here," the latter remarked. "There's something to be said that your father ought to know. I am going to Ashness and expect you to come with me."

"You must wait. I have some sheep at the beckfoot and it will take me half an hour to drive them home," Kit said coolly.

Osborn looked at him with savage surprise. It was unthinkable that he should be forced to wait while the fellow went for his sheep, but he saw that Kit was not to be moved and tried to control his anger.

"Very well. I will meet you at Ashness in half an hour."

Kit braced himself as he went up the road. In a sense, he was not afraid of Osborn, but he had now to meet a crisis that he ought to have seen must come. In fact, he had seen it, and had, rather weakly, tried to cheat himself and put things off.

In the meantime, it was a relief to drive the sheep down the dale; he could not think while he was occupied and thought was disturbing. He put the sheep into a field and overtook Osborn as he went up the farm lonning in the dark. A lamp burned in the kitchen, and when they went in Peter got up and put his pipe on the table. He looked at them with some surprise, but waited without embarrass-

ment. Indeed, Kit thought his father was curiously dignified.

"Mr. Osborn has something to say he wants you to hear," Kit remarked. "Although the thing's really my business, I agreed."

Osborn refused the chair Peter indicated and stood in a stiff pose. His face was red and he looked rather ridiculously savage.

"I found your son and my daughter hiding from me in the hedge at Redmire wood," he said. "I imagine I'm entitled to ask for an explanation."

"Hiding?" said Peter, who turned to Kit. "That was wrong."

"It was wrong," Kit admitted. "I told Mr. Osborn so. In fact, I must have lost my head when I made a mistake like this. Since I had the honour of Miss Osborn's acquaintance——"

"Who presented you to my daughter?" Osborn interrupted.

"Nobody," Kit admitted, with some embarrassment. "The day the otter hounds were hunting the alder pool Miss Osborn wanted to cross the stepping stones. Some of them were covered, and I——"

"Ah!" said Osborn. "Then the thing began as long since as that?" He turned to Peter. "The girl is young and foolishly proud of being unconventional, or she would have known that she could make use of your son's help without an obligation to speak to him again. It's obvious that he has worked on her rebellious humour until she forgot what is due to herself and her parents."

"Stop a bit," said Peter. "She was doing her parents no discredit by speaking to my son."

"No discredit!" Osborn exclaimed, losing his self-control. "When I find her and the fellow skulking out of sight, like a farm hand and a dairymaid!"

Kit raised his head and his eyes sparkled. "In a sense, I am a farm hand; but it would be better if you kept your hard words for me."

"There are varra good dairymaids; modest, hard-working lasses," Peter remarked.

"It's rather late to play the part of a rustic cavalier, if that is what you meant," Osborn said to Kit with a sneer, and then turned to Peter. "I am forced to own that the girl deserves some blame. Although she's impulsive and unconventional, she ought to have seen it was ridiculous to let your son imagine they could be friends."

"You think that was ridiculous?"

"Of course," said Osborn, with haughty surprise. "The absurdity of the thing is obvious."

"Weel," said Peter dryly, "I reckon they might be friends without much harm, though I wadn't have them gan further. Although the lass is yours, the lad is mine."

Osborn laughed scornfully. "If I understand you, your attitude is humorous. But do you wish me to believe you didn't know what was going on? You have made my tenants dissatisfied and plotted against me, and now, no doubt, you saw another means."

"Stop," said Peter, with stern quietness. "We have not been good neebors, though I dinna ken that's much fault o' mine; but if you thowt I'd use a foolish girl to hurt a man I didn't like, you're varra wrang. Hooiver, you came for an explanation, and I want one, too." He turned to Kit. "You had better tell us why you kept up Miss Osborn's acquaintance withoot her father's consent."

"Very well," said Kit, standing very straight and holding up his head. "I met Miss Osborn, so to speak, by accident, and afterwards we sometimes talked. Her beauty and talent were plain to me at first, but it was some time before I knew I loved her, and then it was too late. I knew my folly—it was a folly I couldn't conquer, and now I think I never shall. Well, I suppose I hoped that some day things might change."

"Do you imply that Grace knew what you hoped?" Osborn asked.

"No," said Kit quietly. "I gave her no hint. It was plain that she was willing we should meet and talk like friends. This was not wrong."

"Not wrong that my daughter should meet you secretly!" Osborn exclaimed with sudden rage. "Are you foolish

enough to imagine you and a member of my family could meet like equals ? "

" I have not pretended to be Miss Osborn's equal. But the inequality I acknowledge is not what you mean."

Osborn shrugged with scornful impatience. " Pshaw ! We'll let that go. You said you hoped things might change. Do you think any change of fortune could give you the tastes and feelings of a gentleman ? Make you a proper husband for my daughter ? You know the thing's impossible."

Kit coloured and hesitated, and Peter signed him to be quiet.

" These meetings must be stopped. I'm as much against such a match as I think you are."

" Ah," said Osborn, who looked puzzled, " you hinted something of the kind ! I don't know that your point of view's important, but I can't understand."

" My meaning's no varra hard to see," Peter answered. " The lass is bonny and, so far as I ken, weel-meaning and kind ; but she has been badly browt up at an extravagant hoose. She'll not can help her husband, except may-happen to waste, and she has niver learned to work and gan without. Weel, it seems we are agreed. Miss Osborn is no' the lass I would welcome for my son's wife."

Osborn looked at him with frank surprise. Then he said, " We'll make an end," and turned to Kit. " If you speak to my daughter again, she will be forbidden to leave the Tarnside grounds ; if you write to her, your letter will be burned. She cannot resist my control for the next three or four years. There's nothing more to be said."

He went out and Peter, who walked to the porch with him, came back and looked quietly at Kit.

" A proud and foolish man, but he's hit hard ! " he said. " Mayhappen it will hurt, my lad, but you must be done wi' this. Osborn's daughter is none for you."

Kit looked straight in front, with his hands clenched. " So it seems, for some years. It does hurt. I cannot give her up."

Peter lighted his pipe and there was silence for a few

minutes. Then as Kit did not move he remarked: "I ken something o' what you're feeling; aw t' same you've got to fratch. There's nowt against the lass except that she's Osborn's child, but she's none o' our kind and it's sense and custom that like gans to like."

"It would be easier if I could get away. I can't stop in the dale, knowing she's about and I mustn't see her."

Peter went into the next room and opened an old desk. He had for some time expected that the moment he now shrank from would come and his heart was sore, but he knew his son's steadfast character and meant to save him pain. Going back he gave Kit his brother's last letter.

"Mayhappen it's better that you should gan," he said quietly.

Kit read the letter and looked up with a strained expression. "I never thought I'd want to leave Ashness and I feel a selfish brute! All the same, it would be a relief."

"Just that!" said Peter. "I'll miss you when you've gone, but it's no' my part to stand in your way. We'll write Adam to-morrow and tell him you'll come."

Kit crossed the floor and put his hand on his father's arm "Thanks; I think I know what this means to you. It will cost me something; but I must go."

He went out and Peter sat still, looking gloomily at the fire. He felt old and knew he would be very lonely soon. The fire burned low and the kitchen got cold, but Kit did not come back and when Peter heard his housekeeper's clogs on the stones outside he got up and crossed the floor, to get his hat. Old Bella was curious and he did not want to talk, but there was something to be done in the barn and when his heart was sore it was a relief to work.

PART II.—ON THE CARIBBEAN

CHAPTER I

THE OLD BUCCANEER

IT was about four o'clock in the afternoon and Kit Askew lounged in a chair on the bridge-deck as the *Rio Negro* steamed slowly across the long swell of the Caribbean.

The *Rio Negro* was old and ugly, with short iron masts from which clumsy derricks hung, tall, upright funnel, and blistered, grey paint. Her boats were dirty and stained by soot, and a belt of rust at her waterline hinted at neglect, but no barnacles and weed marred the smoothness of the plates below. Her anti-fouling paint was clean, and her lines beneath the swell of quarter and bows were fine. In fact, the *Rio Negro* was faster than she looked when she carried her regular load of two thousand tons and her under-water body was hidden. She traded in the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean, and at certain ports Customs officials carefully scrutinised her papers. At others, they smiled and allowed her captain privileges that strangers did not get.

Kit wore spotless white clothes, a black-silk belt, and a Panama hat of the expensive kind the Indians weave, holding the fine material under water. A glass occupied a socket in his chair, and when the *Rio Negro* rolled a lump of ice tinkled against its rim; a box of choice cigars lay on the deck. Kit, however, was not smoking, but drowsily pondered the life he had led for the last three years. He was thinner and looked older than when he left Ashness.

He had lost something of his frankness and his raw enthusiasm had gone. His face was quieter and his mouth set in a firm line.

He remembered his surprise when he first met his uncle at a luxurious Florida hotel. Adam Askew wore loose white clothes, a well-cut Tuxedo jacket, a diamond ring, and another big diamond in his scarf. His skin was a curious yellowish brown and his eyes were very black; he rather looked like a Spanish Creole than an Englishman. He had nothing of his brother's quiet manner. Although he was getting old, he walked with a jaunty step; he had a humorous eye, and his laugh was careless. In fact, he had an exotic, romantic look that harmonised with Kit's notions of the pirates who once haunted the Gulf of Mexico. When Kit afterwards learned why Adam's friends called him the "buccaneer," he saw that his first impression was not extravagant.

Now he remembered that when they sat behind the imitation Moorish arches on the hotel veranda Adam studied him and laughed.

"You're certainly Peter's son," he remarked. "I can imagine I'd just left him at the end of the Ashness lonning thirty years since. Except that he's got older, I reckon he hasn't changed, and for that matter, Peter was never young. Well, you are surely like him, but if you stop in this country we'll put a move on you."

"If I'm like my father, I am satisfied," Kit rejoined.

Adam's black eyes twinkled. "Now I see a difference, there's red blood in you. But don't take me wrong. Peter's a white man, straight as a plumb-line, one of the best; he's a year the younger of us, but when the old man died he brought me up. There are two kinds of Askews, and I belong to the other lot. I don't know why they called you after roystering Kit." It was obvious that Adam knew the family history, for Christopher Askew was a turbulent Jacobite who lost the most part of his estate when he joined Prince Charles's starving Highlanders in the rearguard fight at Clifton Moor. Afterwards the sober quietness at Ashness had now and then been disturbed by an Askew who inherited the first Kit's reckless temperament.

Three years had gone since Kit met Adam, and he had learned much. To begin with, Adam sent him to an American business school, and made him study Castillian and French. Then he sent him to Mexico and countries farther south, where he studied human nature of strangely varied kinds. He met and traded with men of many colours : French and Spanish Creoles, negroes, Indians, and half-breeds with some of the blood of all. He knew the American gulf ports and their cosmopolitan hotels and gambling saloons, but Adam noted with half-amused approval that while he was not at all a prig he developed Peter's character and not Kit the Jacobite's. Now they were going south across the Caribbean on a business venture.

By and by Adam came slowly along the bridge-deck. The three years had marked a change in him and Kit thought he did not look well. Adam suffered now and then from malarial ague, caught in the mangrove swamps. He was thin, his yellow face was haggard, and his shoulders were bent. Sitting down close by, he lighted a cigar and turned to Kit.

" We ought to raise the coast before it's dark and I reckon Mayne will get his bearings," he remarked. " The lagoon's a blamed awkward place to enter and I'd have waited until to-morrow only that Don Hernando is expecting us."

" It will save us a day if we can get in, since you want to land the B.F. cargo in the dark," Kit said thoughtfully. " We pay high wages and the *Rio Negro* is an expensive boat to run."

" That's so," Adam agreed with a smile. " You talk like a Cumberland flock-master. Counting every cent you spend is a safe plan, but I don't know that this trip will pan out much of a business proposition."

" Do you feel better for your sleep ? " Kit asked.

" Some, though I've got a headache and a pain in my back. Guess they'll shake off when I get to work."

" I was surprised when you said you meant to sail with us."

" So I imagined," Adam rejoined. " You wondered why

I didn't, as usual, trust you to deliver the goods. Well, there's rather more to this job than that, and I meant to put you wise before we landed. You have heard me called a pirate, but I don't reckon on taking home much plunder now."

Kit mused while Adam beckoned a mulatto steward, who brought him a glass and some ice. His uncle's character was complex. Sometimes he was hard and exacted all that was his; sometimes he was rashly generous. Ostensibly, he was a merchant, shipping tools and machine, particularly supplies for sugar mills, to the countries round the Caribbean, and taking payment in native produce. Kit, however, knew the cases landed from the *Rio Negro* did not always hold the goods the labels stated, and that Adam's money sometimes helped to float an unpopular government over a crisis and sometimes to turn another out. It was a risky business, carried on with people who had a talent for dark revolutionary intrigue.

"Since Don Hernando Alvarez is president of the republic, I don't quite see why we need smuggle in his machine-guns," Kit remarked.

"On the surface, the reason isn't very obvious. Alvarez is president now, but mayn't be very long. It depends on whether he or his rival, Galdar, gets his blow in first. I reckon the chances are against Alvarez if Galdar puts up a fight, but the latter's not ready yet and Alvarez means to arm his troops before the fellow knows. I imagine about half the citizens are plotters and spies."

"Alvarez has been honest so far. I suppose if he wins he'll pay?"

"That's so," said Adam dryly. "If he goes down, we get nothing. Although I don't know much about his ancestors and suspect that one was an Indian, Alvarez is white, but the other fellow's a blamed poor sample of the half-breed nigger. Well, when Alvarez found things were going wrong, he sent for me."

"Ah," said Kit in a thoughtful voice, "I begin to understand."

He did understand, although he would not have done so when he met his uncle first. He had known Adam play

the part of a merciless creditor, and thought a few men could beat him at a bargain, but he kept his bargain when it was made, and now and then risked his money on lost causes. It looked as if he had inherited something from Christopher the Jacobite.

"You have known Alvarez long, haven't you?" Kit resumed.

"When I met him first, he was a customs officer with some perquisites and a salary that paid for liquor and tobacco. Vanhuyten and I ran the old *Mercedes* then, and Van made a mistake that put us at the fellow's mercy. There was a good case for confiscating the schooner, which would have given Alvarez a lift while we went broke. In fact, the night of the crisis, I dropped Van's pistol overboard; he'd got malaria badly and was feeling desperate. Well, all we had given Alvarez didn't cover that kind of job, but he'd promised to stand our friend and kept his word like a gentleman. Guess it needed some nerve and judgment to work things the way he did, and when we stole out to sea at daybreak past the port guard, I knew there was one man in the rotten country I could trust with my life. Now he's in a tight place, he knows he can trust me."

A minute or two later, the fat, brown-faced captain came down from his bridge.

"Looks like the Punta; we've hit her first time," he remarked. "In about an hour I ought to get my marks. When d'you want her taken in?"

"Soon as it's dark," Adam replied. "You'll have to trust your lead and compass. Can't have you whistling for a pilot, and I'd sooner you put out your lights."

"It's your risk and not the first time I've broken rules. I guess I can keep her off the ground. We'll get busy presently and heave the hatches off. The B.F. cases are right on top."

Adam nodded, and beckoned Kit when the captain went away. "You haven't been in the Santa Marta lagoon yet. Stand by and watch the soundings and compass while Mayne takes her across the shoals. You may find it useful to know the channel."

Kit understood. Malaria and other fevers are common

on low-lying belts of the Caribbean coast and skippers and mates fall sick. Moreover, the *Rio Negro* did not always load at the regular ports. Sometimes she crept into mangrove-fringed lagoons, and sometimes stopped at lonely beaches and sent loaded boats ashore when her captain saw the gleam of signal lights.

When it was getting dark, Kit and Adam went to the bridge and the former noted that his uncle breathed rather hard and seized the rails firmly as he climbed the ladder. The red glow of sunset had faded behind the high land and a grey haze spread across the swampy shore, but the water shone with pale reflections. On one side, a long, dingy smear floated across the sky. It did not move and Kit thought it had come from the funnel of a steamer whose engineer had afterwards cleaned his fires. Captain Mayne studied the fleecy trail with his glasses.

"I don't know if that's a coffee-boat going north; I can't make out her hull against the land," he said. "Sometimes there's a *guarda-costa* hanging round the point."

"Better take no chances," Adam replied, glancing at the *Rio Negro's* funnel, from which a faint plume of vapour floated.

Mayne signed to the quartermaster in the pilot-house and the bows swung round. Half an hour afterwards, he rang his telegraph and the clang of engines died away while the throb of the propeller stopped. In what seemed an unnatural silence, a few barefooted deck-hands began to move about, and one stood on the forecastle, where his dark figure cut against the shining sea. The rest went aft with a line the other held, and when Mayne raised his hand there was a splash as the deep-sea lead plunged. A man aft called the depth while he gathered up the line, and Mayne beckoned another, who climbed to a little platform outside the bridge and fastened a strap round his waist.

"We're on the Santa Marta shelf, but I'm four miles off the course I set," Mayne remarked. "I want to work out the angle from the first bearing I got."

Kit went with him into the chart-room, for he knew something about navigation. They had taught him the

principles of land-surveying at the agricultural college, and this had made his studies easier. When he came back the moon was getting bright, but the haze had thickened on the low ground and the heights behind had faded to a vague, formless blur. The trail of smoke had vanished, there was no wind, and the smooth swell broke against the bows with a monotonous dull roar as the *Rio Negro* went on. She was alone on the heaving water and steaming slowly, but the noise of her progress carried far. By and by a light twinkled ahead, leaped up into a steady glow that lasted for some minutes, and then went out.

"That's a relief," remarked Adam, who had struck a match and studied his watch. "The ground's clear and Don Hernando has somebody he can trust waiting at the lagoon. You can let her go ahead, Captain."

Mayne rang his telegraph and Kit went into the pilot-house. The dim light of the binnacle lamp touched the compass, but everything else was dark and the windows were down. Kit could see the quartermaster's dark form behind the wheel, and the silver shining of the sea. There was a splash as the man on the platform released the whirling hand-lead. When he called the depth Mayne gave an order and the quartermaster pulled round the wheel. The swell was not so smooth now. It ran in steep undulations and in one place to starboard a broad, foaming patch appeared between the rollers. Kit knew the water was shoaling fast as the *Rio Negro* steamed across the inclined shelf. It was risky work to take her in, because the fire had vanished and there were no marks to steer for. Mayne must trust his compass and his rough calculations.

"Tide's running flood," he said to Adam. "She'd have steered handier if we'd gone in against the ebb; but there's a better chance of coming off if she touches ground."

"You don't want to touch ground and stop there with the B.F. goods on board," Adam replied.

After this, there was silence except when Mayne gave an order. White upheavals broke the passing swell on both sides of the ship. She rolled with violent jerks and at regular intervals the bows swung up. When they sank, a dark

mass with a ragged top cut off the view from the pilot-house, and Kit knew it was a mangrove forest. He could see no break in the wall of trees that grew out of the water, but they were not far off when there was a heavy jar and the *Rio Negro* stopped. The floor of the pilot-house slanted and Kit and the quartermaster fell against the wheel. Then there was a roar as a white-topped roller came up astern and broke about the vessel's rail in boiling foam. She lifted, struck again, and went on with an awkward lurch.

"Port; hard over!" Mayne shouted hoarsely, and Kit helped the quartermaster to pull round the wheel.

The vessel went on, with engines thumping steadily; the hollow in the forest opened up until it became a gap and Kit could not see trees behind it. Mayne gave another sharp order, and Kit and the quartermaster pulled at the wheel. The dark bows swung, the speed quickened, and the rolling stopped. The throb of the screw and thump of engines echoed across misty woods and there was a curious gurgling noise that Kit thought was made by the tide rippling among the mangrove roots. The air got damp and steamy and a sour smell filled the pilot-house. Kit knew the odours of rotting leaves, spices, and warm mud.

In the meantime, he was kept occupied at the wheel, for Mayne changed his course as the trees rolled past, until the telegraph rang and the engines stopped. Then there was silence until he heard the splash of the anchor and the roar of running chain. As the *Rio Negro* slowly swung round the winches rattled and her boats were hoisted out. Kit got into one with Adam and landed on a muddy beach. Dark figures came down to meet them, horses were waiting at the edge of the forest, and a few minutes later they mounted and plunged into the gloom.

CHAPTER II

THE PRESIDIO

DAZZLING sunshine flooded the belt of sand where the shadows of dusty palmettos quivered beyond the Moorish arch; the old presidio smelt like a brick-kiln and the heat outside was nearly intolerable. In the middle of the dirty patio a fountain splashed in a broken marble basin, and it was dim, and by contrast cool, under the arcade where Kit sat among the crumbling pillars. The presidio was a relic of Spanish dominion and its founders had built it well, copying, with such materials as they could get, stately models the Moors had left in the distant Peninsula. A part had fallen and blocks of sun-baked mud lay about in piles, but the long, white front with its battlemented top and narrow, barred windows stood firm. In spite of the ruinous patio, the presidio was the finest building in the town.

The others, so far as Kit could see, were squares of mud, for the most part whitewashed, although some were coloured pink and cream. The glare they reflected was dazzling, but a row of limp palmettos ran between them and the space in front of the presidio, and here and there Kit noted rounded masses of vivid green. Except for the splash of the fountain, all was very quiet, and although the shadows had lengthened it looked as if the half-breed citizens were still enjoying their afternoon sleep. Now and then a barefooted sentry noiselessly passed the arch. He wore a dirty white uniform and ragged palm-leaf hat, but carried a good modern rifle, and Kit knew where the latter had come from. The country was rich with coffee.

A table, carrying some very small glasses and coffee-cups, stood in the arcade. Don Hernando Alvarez occupied the other side, and Kit imagined it was not by accident he sat with his back to a whitewashed pillar, since he was in the shadow and as he wore white cloths could not be seen a short distance off. Don Hernando's hair was coarse

and his skin dark. His face was well moulded, although the cheek-bones were prominent ; his black eyes were keen and his thin lips firm. He wore a plain red sash, with no other touch of colour except a bit of riband on his breast. It was obvious that he was not a Peninsular, as pure-blooded Spaniards call themselves, but he looked like a man who must be reckoned on. Just then his dark face was moody.

" You have come in good time," he said to Adam Askew, in Castillian. " I think the curtain will soon go up for the last act of the drama, but the plot is obscure and I do not know the end."

" I imagine the action will be rapid," Adam replied. " Unless you have changed much, you are cut out for your part."

" Ah," said Alvarez, " one gets cautious as one gets old. One loses the young man's quick, sure touch."

" That is so, to some extent," Adam agreed, and indicated Kit. " It explains why I have a partner ; my brother's son. Still, perhaps one sees farther when one is old."

Alvarez bowed to Kit. " You have a good model, señor ; a man who seldom hesitates and whose word goes. A rare thing in this country ; I do not know about yours." Then he turned to Adam with a hint of anxiety. " How far do you see now ? "

" I see what I have to do and that is enough. The consequences come afterwards."

Alvarez's face cleared. " You were always a gambler, but you run some risk if you bet on me." He was silent for a moment and then resumed : " In a sense I envy you ; you have a partner you can trust, but I stand alone. My son was found in the plaza with a knife in his back, and the man who killed him goes unpunished."

" Galdar was somewhere behind that deed, although I do not see his object yet," Adam remarked.

" The people liked Maccario and his removal cleared the ground. My enemy is cunning and, I think, did not mean to force a conflict until my friends had gone. Now there are not many left and the time has come. Morales

died of poison, Diaz of snake-bite, and Vinoles was shot by a curious accident. So far, I have escaped; perhaps because I was lucky, and perhaps because it was not certain the people would choose Galdar if I followed my friends."

"I have wondered why you hold on. For a president of this country, you have had a good run. I think I would have left after a few prosperous years and located at Havana, for example."

Alvarez smiled. "There was a time when we had money in the treasury and I might have gone; but it was too late afterwards. Part of the revenue stopped in Galdar's hands—that was one way of embarrassing me—and I was forced to use the rest to undermine his plots. Now I am drawing on my small private estate."

"But why didn't you go while there was something left? You are not extravagant and do not need much."

Kit thought Adam's remark was justified. Alvarez lived with Indian frugality and looked ascetic; besides he had been long in power and had no doubt had opportunities for enriching himself at his country's expense. Kit liked Alvarez, but did not think him much honester than other Spanish-American rulers he had met.

"It was partly for my daughter's sake I stopped," Alvarez replied. "She is at a Spanish convent and I would not leave her poor. Then I had my son's death to avenge." He paused and added with a deprecatory smile: "Moreover I have thought I can rule this country better than my rival."

"That's a sure thing," Adam agreed, in English. "Well, you had better tell me how you think matters are going. If I'm to help you properly, I want to know."

"It is hard to tell; a gamble in which one takes steep chances! Perhaps half the people with an object are for Galdar, and half for me. Those who have none will wait and back the man they think will win. So far, I have the soldiers, but their pay is behind and they are badly armed and drilled. They will stand by me if I can give them machine-guns and pay off arrears. But this must be done soon, without Galdar knowing. The next president will be the man who strikes before the other is ready."

"What will the thing cost altogether?" Adam asked.

He looked thoughtful when Alvarez told him, and then nodded. "All right. You'll get some of the guns to-morrow and another lot is on the way. Go ahead; I'll help you put the business over."

Alvarez filled the little glasses with a liquor that had a strong, spicy smell, and when his guests lifted them touched theirs with his.

"It is what I had hoped, my friend. If I live, you will not lose."

He drank and then held his glass slackly poised while he mused. Kit, who was nearest the arch, turned and glanced out. He saw the reflected light quiver across the trampled sand and the dusty green of the limp palmettos. Then, below the latter, there was a pale-yellow flash and the president's glass fell with a tinkle. A pistol-shot rang out and Kit swinging round, saw that a flake of plaster had dropped on the table. There was some dust on Alvarez's brown face and on his clothes, but he looked unmoved.

Next moment Adam leaned on the table, steadying a heavy automatic pistol, and three quick flashes streamed from the jerking barrel. Three small puffs of dust leaped up about the roots of a palmetto and as the empty cartridges rattled on the floor Kit thought an indistinct figure stole through the shadow of the fan-shaped leaves. He was not certain, because the light was dazzling and thin smoke drifted about his head.

He threw his chair back and plunging through the arch ran across the sand and stopped at the top of a narrow street. Men and women of different shades of colour came out of the doors and began to talk excitedly, but there was nobody who looked like a fugitive. Kit went back after he got his breath and met two or three untidy, barefooted soldiers who ran past. When he entered the arch Adam was coolly reloading his pistol while the president dusted his clothes.

"It is nothing—they have tried again," the latter remarked. "Still, it looks as if Galdar felt himself stronger than I thought. Now, with your permission, I will go and

give some orders." He smiled as he added: "There will be some prisoners by and by, men my guards do not like, but the fellow who fired the shot will not be caught."

"What about the sentry?" Adam asked.

Alvarez shrugged. "It is hot, and perhaps he was half asleep. I think the man is faithful, and just now I am the soldier's friend."

He went off and Adam filled his glass and looked at Kit. "I feel I'm getting old and want another drink. I got the bead on the fellow's dark head and missed him by a yard. Well, I guess you can't expect to have steady fingers when you've got malarial ague. It's a dramatic kind of country, anyhow."

Kit lighted a maize-leaf cigarette and mused. He had been startled, but his nerve was good and he knew something about the dark-skinned, reckless people of the South. They were robbed by their rulers, who spent the most part of the revenue to keep themselves in power; and sometimes, when the vote was useless, assassination seemed the only remedy. But it was on his uncle's promise Kit's thoughts dwelt. Although Adam was rich, the sum Alvarez needed was large. The latter was honest, in a sense, and Kit thought would not rob his friend, but he might be unable to make repayment. In fact, he had warned Adam that there was a risk and the bullet that struck the pillar was a significant hint. The venture looked rash, but Adam had stated that it was not a business proposition. He and the president were friends and this counted for much. The old Buccaneer had a sentimental vein.

Then Kit's thoughts strayed, and he wondered what Peter was doing in the north country dale. Kit had prospered since he joined Adam and the latter had hinted that he might be rich, but he was tired of intrigue and excitement and the glare of the south. He wanted the bracing winds, and the soft lights that chased the flying shadows across the English hills. He smiled as he reflected that he was like the Herdwicks that never forgot their native heaf; but while he longed for the red moors and straight-cut valleys he felt a stronger call.

He thought about Grace Osborn, steady-eyed and marked by English calm. She was frank and sometimes impulsive, but even then one got a hint of proud reserve. There was no touch of southern coquetry about Grace, she was not the girl to attract a lover and let him go, but if he came and proved his worth, she would go forward with him steadfastly through the storms of life. Kit sighed and pulled himself up. Grace was not for him and he must not be a romantic fool. He looked round and saw that Adam was quietly studying him.

"What are you thinking about, partner?" he asked, and Kit knew the epithet meant much. Adam had not called him partner at first.

"I was thinking about Ashness," he replied.

"Ah!" said Adam softly, "I often think about it too; the old house among the ash trees, and the Herdwicks feeding on the long slope behind. The red heath on the fell-top and the beck bubbling in the ghyll. Everything's clean and cool in the quiet dale, and the folk are calm and slow." He paused and resumed with a curious smile: "Once I reckoned I'd go back when I got rich and make things hum, but when I had the dollars I saw that plan wouldn't work. Those quiet folk would have beaten me with their unchanging ways, and Ashness is too good to spoil. For all that, I allowed I'd see it again before I died, but now I don't know."

His smile faded and he gave Kit a keen glance. "Why did you pull out? It wasn't for my money. You haven't told me yet."

"No," said Kit, with some embarrassment. "I hardly think it's much of a story, but if you like I'll tell you now."

After a few moments he stopped awkwardly, and Adam raised his hand.

"Go on. I want to get the girl properly fixed."

Kit was not skilled at sketching character, but he drew Grace's portrait well, and when he stopped Adam made a sign of sympathy.

"You have helped me place her. Don't know I'd have trusted another man's judgment when he talked about

his sweetheart, but you're not a fool. Well, it seems to me the girl's worth getting."

"Miss Osborn is not my sweetheart. It is possible I shall never see her again."

"But you can't forget her?"

"No," said Kit quietly; "I can't forget."

Adam was silent for some moments and then looked up.

"You're like Peter, slow and staunch, but that's one reason you're my partner. Well, I know Osborn's kind; folk we have no use for in the United States. White trash, we call them; men with no abilities, whose foolish pride makes them think it's mean to work. Reckon they've first claim on the soft jobs and don't belong to the world of fighting men. But I guess they listen when money talks."

Kit said nothing, although he thought Adam's concluding remark significant, and the old man went on: "Don Hernando helped me on my feet when I and Vanhuyten first came along this coast, with about a thousand dollars and a worn-out schooner. He's been my friend ever since and now he's hard up against it I've got to see him out. Guess it's going to cost me high, but when the job's put over there ought to be some money left and I don't know that you need forget the girl if she hasn't forgotten you. Well, perhaps I've said enough, and now I'll go and see where Don Hernando is."

Adam got up and as he crossed the patio Kit noted that his shoulders were bent and his movements slack. Adam had changed much since their first meeting at the Florida hotel. He had some very obvious faults, but Kit knew what he owed him and felt disturbed.

CHAPTER III

THE GOLD ONZA

KIT paused as he wound the long silk sash round his waist, and looked out of the window of his room at the presidio. Square blocks of houses, coloured white and yellow, ran down the hill. Here and there a palm rose from an opening, and the dusty green of the alameda broke the monotony of the flat roofs and straight, blank walls that gave the town an Eastern look.

Kit noted the strength of the presidio's situation. The old building stood high, its battlemented roof commanded the narrow streets, and there was a broad open space all round. He thought a few machine-guns would make it impregnable, since a revolutionary mob was not likely to be provided with artillery.

Kit tucked the end of the sash under the neatly-arranged folds. Some time is required to put on a Spanish *faja* and at first Kit had thought the trouble unnecessary, but had found it is prudent to protect the middle of the body in a hot climate. When he was satisfied, he turned and looked about the room. There were no curtains or carpets, and two very crude religious pictures were fixed to the wall. Although the air was not yet hot, it was not fresh, and a smell of spices, decay and burnt oil came in through the window that opened on the patio.

A sunbeam touched a small earthen jar, holding a bunch of feather flowers. The jar was harshly coloured, but the outline was bold and graceful, and Kit knew no pottery like that had been made in the country since the Spaniards came. He had bought it with the flowers for a few dollars, and remembered that the shopkeeper had included its contents when he offered it to him. "*Todo loque hay*," he said in uncouth Castillian.

Kit, turning over the jar carelessly, took out the flowers and as he did so something inside rattled and a large coin fell into his hand. The coin was old and heavy; indeed, he thought it weighed about an ounce. Taking it to the

window, he rubbed its dull face and when the metal began to shine sat down with a thoughtful look. Unless he was mistaken, the coin was gold and did weigh an ounce.

When he finished dressing he went to the little, dark shop. The shopkeeper was making coffee with a handful of charcoal on the doorstep, for the sake of the draught, and took off his hat politely as Kit came up.

"I found a piece of money in the jar I bought from you," Kit said in Castillian.

"Then your worship is lucky," the other remarked.

"But the money was not mine."

The shopkeeper shrugged. "What matter? It is yours now. Was the coin worth much?"

"It was worth finding."

"Well," said the shopkeeper, "I do not know where the money came from, and it may have been there a very long time. The jar is old and I bought it from an Indian some years since." He paused and gave Kit a keen glance. "You will remember that I offered you the jar with all there was inside."

"You did; it held some feather flowers. Still, as you did not know about the money——"

"Then you want to give it back, if the owner can be found!"

"Certainly," said Kit.

The shopkeeper bowed. "I will make inquiries. If you should need anything I sell, señor, perhaps you will remember that I am an honest man."

Kit went away, feeling puzzled and somewhat surprised. It looked as if the fellow was honest, but Kit thought he had studied him and there was something curious about his manner. Besides, a remark he made implied that he knew the coin was old.

When he ate his eleven o'clock breakfast with Adam and he President in the arcade, he took out the coin and told hem about the shopkeeper's refusal to take it back.

"A Spanish onza," Adam remarked. "Worth nearly five pounds in English money, but a collector might give you more if it's as old as it looks. One used to see onzas in Cuba, and native merchants in Central America, who hadn't

much use for banks, liked to get them. Now, however, they're getting scarce."

"In this country, all gold coins are scarce," Alvarez said. "I agree with the shopkeeper that Don Cristoval is fortunate, and expect he feels that my people are honester than he thought."

"I was puzzled——" said Kit, and stopped, for he saw the president's smile and began to understand.

"You are shrewd, señor; but that was to be expected from my old friend's nephew. To begin with, the man who keeps the shop is not a supporter of the Government."

"Yes," said Kit, "I think I can see!"

Alvarez bowed. "One can trust your intelligence, and you can keep the coin. It looks as if my antagonists were curious about your character—the honour of a man who would take money that does not belong to him is open to doubt. The experiment was cheap."

Kit said nothing and the president filled a little glass with scented liquor. "I know my friends, Don Cristoval, and your uncle has stood much harder tests." He touched Kit's glass with his. "Well, I am lucky, because I may need friends soon."

He got up and when he went down the long arcade Adam looked at Kit with a smile.

"When I was your age I wouldn't have taken the onza back. I'd have kept the money and my faith with the president; in fact, in those days, I kept anything I could get. Now the other fellow knows what you're like, I reckon he'll find the owner of the coin."

Adam went off after the president, and Kit pondered. A few days later, he sat one evening at a small table outside the café Bolivar. The café was badly lighted, hot, and full of flies.

Presently a man who had been playing dominoes got up and came to Kit's table. He was a white man, with pale blue eyes and yellow hair, and although rather fat he carried himself well. Kit had met Olsen before, and he nodded when he sat down.

"Nothing doing at the casino and the place was very hot," he said. "Besides, I don't quite trust the man who

runs the bank. Taking them all round, these folks are clever crooks."

Kit agreed languidly and noted the order Olsen gave the half-breed landlord. The fellow did not look as if he indulged much, but Kit thought a large glass of the strong liquor was not often asked for. As a rule, the Americans he had met on the Carribean coast were abstemious, while the half-breeds and Spaniards were satisfied with small *copitas* of fiery spirits distilled from the sugar cane. The English, German and Scandinavian adventurers consumed them freely, and perhaps the Germans drank the most.

"How do you like it here?" Olsen resumed when he put down his glass. "It's a country that soon palls. Are you stopping long?"

"I can't tell," said Kit, who decided not to state that he knew the country. "You see, I'm not in command."

"No," said Olsen. "I suppose you're a relation of the Buccaneer's?"

"A poor relation. He gave me a lift when I needed it."

Olsen laughed. "Well, I guess he makes you hustle. A pretty lively old pirate, if all one hears is true! I reckon they don't call him the Buccaneer for nothing, but it's hinted that he's beginning to lose his grip. I see your *copita's* empty. Will you take another drink?"

"No, thanks; I've had enough," said Kit, who distrusted Olsen. He thought the fellow's careless remarks covered some curiosity, and had tried to leave him in doubt. Olsen probably imagined he was Adam's clerk.

"You're cautious, but one soon gets reckless here," Olsen resumed. "We are all adventurers, out for what we can get, and the chances against our making good are pretty steep. My notion is to have the best time I can, pick up as many dollars as possible, and quit before fever, intrigue, or a revolution knocks me out."

"It's an exciting life," Kit agreed. "Dollars don't seem plentiful."

"You have got to hustle and back the right man. Since you're stopping at the presido, it's obvious that Askew's on the president's side. Well, I suppose everybody knows my employers have put their money on Galdar."

"Then, I imagine you run some risk."

"Sure," said Olsen smiling. "Alvarez doesn't like me, and if I wasn't an American citizen, I'd feel scared. Showed his secratary my naturalisation papers when I put up my shingle. Took them out as soon as I reached the United States from Norway."

Kit pondered. Olsen spoke English and Castillian well, but his accent was not American, nor, Kit thought, Scandinavian. There were a number of Germans in the country, engaged in extensive but rather dark commercial schemes, whom the United States consuls watched with jealous eyes. Kit knew that no one could transact much business without to some extent meddling with native politics, but while the other adventurers were satisfied with the money they could get, it looked as if the Germans wanted something else. It was perhaps significant that Olsen had, so to speak, insisted that he was a naturalised American and came from Norway. Kit doubted.

"Askew's judgment is generally pretty good, but he's getting old," Olsen remarked. "I don't see why he's backing the president; my notion is, Galdar's surely going to win." He paused and looked at Kit thoughtfully. "In fact, if I was holding a clerk's job on the other side, I'd consider if it wouldn't pay me to change."

Kit imagined this was a cautious feeler, made to find out if he could be bought, but he smiled.

"If Galdar does win, he won't have much to give his friends."

"He certainly won't have many dollars," Olsen agreed. "It's going to cost him all he can raise to turn Alverez out, but he'll have something to give at the country's expense; sugar and coffee concessions, and perhaps monoplies. If I can get my share, it will pay my employers well and I allow they're generous."

He stopped, as if he thought he had said enough, and after ordering another drink looked up with a grin. Two girls in light dresses had passed the café once or twice with a male companion and a fat old woman who wore black clothes. Kit had not noticed them particularly, because other groups were moving about, but he now remarked that

the man had gone and the *dueña* was a yard or two in front. One of the girls looked round and he thought her glance searched the café and then stopped at his table.

"The señorita's a looker," said Olsen. "I wonder which of us she fancies. She's been round this way before."

"I'm not remarkably handsome, and there are other people in the café," Kit replied. "Anyhow, I don't want to get a jealous señorito's knife in my back."

"You're a blamed cautious fellow," Olsen rejoined in a meaning tone. "However, you'll find me at the casino evenings if you feel you'd like a talk, and now I'll get along."

He went off and Kit smoked another cigarette. He thought Olsen had, so to speak, been sounding him; the fellow had certainly given him some hints. Kit imagined he had taken a prudent line by keeping the other in the dark about his partnership with Adam and their plans.

When he had smoked his cigarette he crossed the street to the alameda and went up a broad walk beneath the trees. The sky had cleared, the moon was high, and in front of the openings pools of silver light lay upon the ground. By and by Kit saw the group he had noticed a few yards ahead. They were moving slowly, and although he walked no faster he soon came up with them. The girl who had looked into the café was nearest and the moonlight touched her face as she turned her head.

Kit gave her a half curious glance and felt some surprise, for he could see her better now, and thought her a pure-blooded Spaniard. The *Peninsulares* were aristocrats, the girl had a touch of dignity, and her dress was rich. It was strange if a girl like that was willing to defy conventions and risk an intrigue with a stranger. Yet he imagined he had seen her smile, and she carried a little bunch of purple flowers in the hand nearest him. He looked again and saw that she was beautiful and moved with the grace that generally marks the *Peninsulares* when they are young. The path was broad and he could keep level with the group without exciting curiosity, but he thought it curious that the fat old woman, who ought to have guarded the others, was in front.

He resolved to go past, and just before he did so the

girl gave him a glance that he thought was half amused and half provocative. Then she turned her head and next moment he saw a flower near his feet. He noted a faint smell of heliotrope and knew she had dropped the flower for him. This meant something, although it would not have much significance unless he picked up the heliotrope. He did not, and walking past with a quicker step, heard a soft laugh.

When he reached the presidio he sat down on the balcony that overlooked the patio outside his room. There was nobody about and he began to muse. It was rash to take things for granted, but he thought he had been made the subject of three experiments. Somebody had put a gold onza in the Indian jar ; Olsen had tried to find out if he was ambitious ; and the girl in the alameda meant to learn if he could be moved by beauty. Well, they ought to know something about him now, but they were not clever or they would have extended their experiments over a longer time. It looked as if they thought him something of a fool, and this was, perhaps, an advantage.

His curiosity was excited and he wanted to find out the girl's object. Indeed, it was hard to see why he had left the flower alone, but he had a vague feeling that it was unfair to use a charming girl in a dark intrigue. Since he had known Grace Osborn, he had given women a higher place. For her sake, he would try not to gain an advantage against his and the president's antagonist by embarking on an adventure with the Spanish girl.

CHAPTER IV

THE PRESIDENT'S BALL

BREAKFAST was over and Alvarez, sitting at a table in the arcade, smiled as he indicated the transformed patio. The broken pavement had been swept, the fountain scrubbed until the marble showed white veins, and the old

brass rails of the balconies gleamed with yellow reflections where the sunshine fell. Small palms and flowering plants in tubs stood among the pillars, flags hung from crumbling cornices, and barefooted peons were fastening up coloured lamps.

"When the people are discontented they must be amused," the president remarked. "In Rome, they gave them circuses and I had thought of a bull-fight. There is a Spanish quadrilla in Cuba but I found it would cost too much to bring the company across. Besides, I do not know if strong excitement would be good for the citizens."

"A bull is safer," Adam agreed. "While they have the function to talk about they'll forget the plot."

"For a week, perhaps! Well, it ought to be some help, if your agents are prompt."

"They're hustlers and know they've got to get busy. I expect the *Rio Negro* back in fourteen days, and then it will be your business to rush her cargo up. Mule transport's slow on your swamp tracks, and it's perhaps unfortunate you didn't give my friends the concession for the light railroad. You might have found it useful now."

Alvarez shrugged. "A railroad can be cut, and locomotives break down at awkward times when their drivers are bribed. Then, I have granted so many concessions that there is not much foreigners think worth getting left in the country. One must keep something to bargain with."

"Governing a people like yours is an expensive job. However, since they make it expensive, they oughtn't to grumble if you tax them high."

"They do not always pay the taxes," Alvarez rejoined, "If they turn me out, they will probably disown their debts, and then there will be trouble with the foreigners. Still, that is not very imprtant, because I shall be gone and the Americans will not let the others' consuls use much pressure. The speculators understand the risks."

"That's so," said Adam and added meaningly: "Some of the speculators are American."

Alvarez put his finely-shaped hand on Adam's arm. "My friend, if it is possible, you will be paid. If not, it will be because I am dead."

"I know," said Adam. "I'm not scared to take chances, and when they go against me I don't grumble. Anyhow, time is important, and if you work this ball properly it ought to give us another week. You'll get the money for your soldiers shortly afterwards and Mayne will land your guns."

The president's dark face softened, and he smiled.

"I know whom I can trust," he said and went away.

"If it's possible for a half-breed to be an honest man, Don Hernando meets the bill," Adam remarked. "Anyhow, he's a better president than these folks deserve, and they'll be blamed fools if they turn him down." He was silent for a few moments and then resumed: "I gave you a share in my business, Kit, and now, if you are willing. I'll buy you out."

"But I'm quite satisfied; I'd much sooner stick to our agreement," Kit said with surprise.

"Well, I guess you're rash. Your share isn't large, but it would go some way to buy an English farm. Raising Herdwick sheep is a pretty tame occupation, but I reckon it's safer than backing Alvarez.

Kit thought hard and imagined he saw Adam's object. "Of course," he said, "if you want to get rid of me——"

"I don't know that I'm keen. You're some help, but you came out to forget the girl in England, and not to stop. Well, if you mean to go, now's your time."

"The trouble is, I haven't forgotten her," Kit answered quietly.

Adam's eyes twinkled. "If you go home, you may get her, and I allow she's probably worth that effort, but you're not going to side-track me like that. If you quit now, I can buy you out and you'll have something to help you make another start; afterwards I mayn't be able. You needn't hesitate about taking the money; I guess you've earned it."

"I suspected where you were leading. Still, you see, I'd sooner stop. For one thing, I hate leaving an awkward job half finished. You're beginning to feel the job is bigger than you thought?"

"It certainly is," Adam agreed. "However, since you insist, I'll talk plain. Alvarez has no claim on you, although

he has a claim on me, and I pay my debts. The last to fall due is going to strain my finances, but it must be paid, a hundred cents for every dollar. All the same, the liability is not yours. There's no reason why you shouldn't pull out while you're safe."

Kit shook his head. "I see a reason. I don't know if it's sound, but after all one's self-respect is worth something."

"Oh, well!" said Adam, "we won't quarrel. You're very like Peter and he was the staunchest man I knew."

When evening came Kit entered the arcade and sat down in a quiet spot to look about. The moon was nearly full and flooded half the patio with silver light; the rest was in shadow and rows of coloured lamps twinkled in the gloom. A band played behind the pillars, the rattle of castenets breaking in on the tinkle of the guitars when the beat was sharply marked. The music was seductive, unlike any Kit had heard in England, and he thought it tinged by the melancholy the Moors had brought, long since, from the East to Spain.

At one end of the patio, portly señoras with powdered faces sat among the pillars, and grave dark-skinned citizens moved about the pavements in talking groups. A heavily-built man with a very swarthy colour and thick lips went to and fro among them, bowing and smiling, and Kit knew this was Galdar, the president's rival. Kit did not like the fellow and thought his negro strain was marked. He looked cruel and cunning. For the most part, the president stood outside the crowd, although now and then a group formed about him. He was tall and thin, his dark face was inscrutable, and Kit thought he looked lonely and austere.

By and by an officer Kit had met told him he must dance and took him along the arcade. The officer stopped where two girls sat under a string of lamps, with a man in black clothes and a fat old woman behind. At first, Kit could not see them well, but when they got up he started as he recognised the girl who had dropped the flower. Then he tried to hide his embarrassment as he was presented to Señorita Francisca Sarmiento. She was handsomer than he had

thought, and as she made him a stately curtsey her eyes twinkled.

Kit imagined the other girl studied him carefully and wondered whether she knew about the flower. It was, however, his duty to ask the señorita to dance, and after a few moments they crossed the pavement. Kit had some misgivings because the dance was involved and one used a number of different steps, but the girl guided him through its intricacies and when he took her back signed him to sit down. He obeyed, for Francisca Sarmiento had an imperious air. Other young men came up when the music began again, but passed on, and Kit imagined the girl had made them understand they were to do so since one or two frowned at him.

"Well," she said, looking at him across her fan, "how do you like this country?"

"It has many attractions," Kit replied.

"In this country one gets nothing unless one runs some risk, and you are cautious," Francisca remarked.

Kit noted her insistence on this trait of his. He thought her remarks had a meaning that did not appear on the surface.

"I wonder what grounds you have for thinking so," he said.

"Are they not obvious?" she asked. "Not long since you hesitated to pick up a sprig of heliotrope."

"I durst not think the compliment was meant for me."

Francisca glanced at him with quiet amusement. "You are modest, señor; it looks as if you had a number of virtues. For one thing, I imagine you are honest, and honesty is not very common here." She paused and resumed in a meaning tone: "It is a drawback, if one wants to get rich."

"I don't know that my character is worth your study," Kit replied carelessly.

"You are of some importance, señor. Although I have admitted that you are modest, it is strange you do not know."

"Why should I know?" Kit asked.

Francisca studied him over her ebony fan, which hid

half her face and emphasized the curious glow of her black eyes. "I do not think you are as dull as you pretend. Have you not been experimented on lately?"

"I think I have," said Kit. "After all, a gold onza is not a great temptation. I found another—a spray of heliotrope—harder to resist."

"But you did resist!" she replied in a quiet voice.

"Yes," said Kit, fixing his eyes on her face. "I am an adventurer like the rest, but it is rather a shabby thing to try and gain an advantage in a battle with a woman. Besides, as I'm not clever, I might have failed."

With a languid movement of her head Francisca looked round and Kit imagined she saw the others were too far off to hear. Then she made him a half mocking bow.

"We need not quarrel, señor, and I will give you a hint. Since you are incorruptible, this town is not the place for you. Strangers from the north sometimes get fever. And I would not like you to suffer because you are honest, and have chosen the losing side."

"Ah," said Kit, "you think our side will lose?"

Francisca moved her fan as if to indicate Galdar, who stood in the moonlight near the fountain. He was smiling urbanely and a number of men and women had gathered about him. Kit knew they were people of importance. At the end of the patio, the president stood alone in the advancing gloom.

"You see!" she said. "Well, I am engaged for the next dance. You have my leave to go."

Presently Kit joined Adam, who sat near a lamp. His face was damp and looked pinched.

"Let's go and get a drink," he said. "I'm thirsty; got a dose of intermittent fever again."

Some tables behind the pillars were laid out with wine and fruit, and Adam beckoned a mulatto waiter.

"*Tinto and siphon.* Bring some ice."

"There is no *siphon*, señor. We have sherry, vermouth, and some very good anisado."

"You have plenty *siphon*," Adam declared. "Go and look."

The waiter went away and Adam frowned. "I can't

stand their scented liquors; I want a long, cool drink."

After a few minutes, the waiter came back with a large glass, in which a lump of ice floated in red wine and mineral water. Adam, sending him away, remarked: "That's a stupid fellow. I wanted to mix the stuff myself."

He drank thirstily and put down the glass.

"Tastes bitter; too much resin in the wine, or perhaps it's imagination." He lifted the glass but stopped and threw the rest of the liquor on the pavement. "Reckon I've had enough. About the meanest drink I've struck. Give me a cigar. The taste stops in my mouth."

Kit gave him a cigar, but after a few minutes he threw it away.

"I don't feel much better and I think I'll go to my room. You might come along; the stairs are steep."

He got up awkwardly and leaned upon the table, breathing rather hard while big drops of sweat started from his forehead. "This confounded ague grips me tight. Don't know when I felt so shaky. Better give me your arm."

They started and, keeping in the shadow, reached the outside stairs without exciting much curiosity, but Kit felt disturbed. Adam went up slowly, stopping now and then, and stumbled across the balcony at the top. Bright moonlight shone into the bare room, where a small lamp burned and Kit saw that Adam's face was wet.

"Leave me alone," he said. "You can come back by and by and see how I'm getting on."

Kit did not want to go, but gave way when Adam insisted. He met the president soon afterwards.

"Where is Don Adam?" the latter asked.

Kit told him and added that his uncle had seemed to get worse after drinking some red wine.

"Ah!" said Alvarez thoughtfully. "Fresh lime-juice is better when one is feverish. Did he drink anything else?"

"No," said Kit. "The waiter wanted to bring some anisado, but he insisted on the wine."

Alvarez took him to the table where the refreshments were served and clapped his hands. A waiter came up, but Kit said, "That is not the boy."

"Where are your companions?" the president asked.

"One is washing the glasses, señor. I do not know where the other has gone."

Alvarez opened a door and Kit saw a man putting small *copitas* into a pail.

"It was another fellow who brought the wine," he said, and Alvarez beckoned the waiter.

"Call the mayor-domo."

A man dressed in plain black clothes came in, and Alvarez asked; "How many of these fellows did you send to serve the wine?"

"Two, señor. It was enough."

"Three came. It will be your business to find the third," said the president sternly and turned to Kit. "What was the fellow like?"

Kit described the waiter and Alvarez said to the mayor-domo, "You will be held accountable if the man has got away. Send Dr. Martin to the bottom of the stairs."

The mayor-domo went away and Alvarez knitted his brows.

"Galdar's friends are bold, but I had not expected this. However, Don Adam's drinking wine may have baulked them and Martin is a good doctor."

Kit asked no questions, for he could trust the president and thought there was no time to lose. They crossed the patio and found a man waiting in the shadow at the bottom of the steps. Alvarez said a word or two and they went up. When they entered the room Adam glanced up from the bed.

"I see you have brought the doctor," he said with an effort.

"In this country, one takes precautions," Alvarez replied. "You look ill, my friend."

"I'd have looked worse if I'd drunk anisado," Adam remarked. "Anyhow, you had better light out and let Señor Martin get to work."

The doctor, who felt Adam's pulse, made a sign of agreement, and then, writing on a leaf of his pocket-book, gave it to the president.

"Will you send that to my house? I need the things at once."

Alvarez moved away, and Adam looked at Kit with a forced smile. "You needn't be anxious, partner. I didn't drink all the wine; reckon they haven't got me yet."

Then they went out and left Adam with the doctor.

CHAPTER V

OLSEN'S OFFER

FOR a time Kit wandered about the arcade, talking now and then to people he knew. The doctor had forbidden him to return to Adam's room, and the president said it was important the guests should not know that anything unusual had happened. Although Kit watched the stairs anxiously, nobody came down, but he saw the mayor-domo going quietly about and servants came and went on mysterious errands. When he looked out he found the sentries had been doubled on the terrace and one stopped when, for a few moments, Kit left the arch, but the soldier knew him and marched on. While it was obvious that the waiter was being looked for, Kit thought the search had begun too late.

At length, Alvarez sent for him, and although his heart beat as he followed the messenger he felt some relief when he saw the president.

"I have good news," the latter said. "The doctor is no longer anxious and you may see your uncle in the morning. It looks as if Don Adam's caution saved him."

"You mean when he refused the anisado?"

Alvarez nodded. "It is a strong-smelling liquor and one drinks a small quantity, taking water afterwards, if one wants. Don Adam knows the country, and after all, my enemies have not much imagination. To offer him anisado was a rather obvious trick."

"I'm thankful they failed," Kit said sternly, and clenched

his fist with sudden passion. "If they had not——"

"One understands, Don Cristoval; I have felt like that when the plotters did not fail," Alvarez answered with grim sympathy. He was silent for a moment or two and Kit imagined he was thinking about his murdered son, when he resumed. "Well, we shall have a reckoning and it will be bad for the dogs when I send in my bill. But that must wait, and I would like you to dance. I see Señorita Sarmiento is not engaged and she dances well."

"I doubt if Dora Francisca would care to dance with me again."

"Ah!" said Alvarez, "one should not be too modest! Francisca is a politician, but she is a woman. Perhaps you found she is not on my side?"

"I imagined she was not."

Alvarez shrugged. "Well, I do not fight with women, although they are sometimes dangerous. Try again, my friend. Just now we are all playing at make-believe."

Kit obeyed and found Francisca gracious. She danced with him and afterwards allowed him to sit by her. By and by she remarked: "I have not seen Señor Askew for some time."

"He is not very well," said Kit.

Francisca studied his face. "I hope his illness is not serious. I thought I saw Dr. Martin."

"Fever. My uncle gets it now and then."

"I think I warned you against our fevers," Francisca replied meaningly. "There are two or three kinds, but all are not dangerous."

"Some are?" Kit suggested.

"Yes; to foreigners. We others take precautions and are acclimatised."

"Well," said Kit in a thoughtful voice, "I have not had fever yet, but I suppose an unacclimatised adventurer runs some risk."

Francisca played with her fan and Kit imagined she was pondering.

"A risk that leads to nothing is not worth while," she remarked. "I think it would be prudent if you left the country while you are well."

"I should be sorry if I thought you wanted me to go," said Kit.

"That is cheap, señor. I gave you good advice."

"Oh, well," said Kit, "I really think you did! There are matters about which we do not agree; but I believe you are too kind to let a rather ignorant antagonist get hurt."

When the guests began to leave, Kit went to his room and after some hours of broken sleep was told that Adam wanted him. He found Alvarez in the room and Adam lying, with a flushed face and wet forehead, in a big cane chair. When Kit came in Adam gave him a friendly smile and turned to Alvarez.

"If I'd taken that drink at a wineshop, I'd have deserved all I got," he said. "I allowed I was safe at the presidio."

"It is a stain on my hospitality for which somebody shall pay."

"That's all right," said Adam; "you're not accountable. Looks as if the other fellow was too smart for both of us; but I had a feeling I'd better stick to *tinto* and *siphon*. You can generally taste anything suspicious in that mixture and I've been doped before. But as I'm an American citizen and American influence is powerful, I didn't expect they'd be bold enough to get after me."

Alvarez smiled. "Our climate is unhealthy, but if you had died and suspicion was excited, your countrymen would have made the president responsible. That would have been another embarrassment, and I have enough."

"Galdar's friends are a cunning lot," Adam replied. 'Well, I think your doctor has fixed me up for a time. What about your plans?"

"I had some talk with my supporters last night and we agreed to strike when the *Rio Negro's* cargo arrives. We need the guns, and the money to pay my troops, and when we get them we will arrest the leading conspirators. This will start the revolution, but it will fail if my blow is struck before Galdar is ready."

"Yes," said Adam. "We can trust Mayne; he knows he's got to hustle. I've fixed it for him to get the Spanish money at Havana, and that will mean losing a day or two,

but the old *Rio Negro* can hit up a pretty good pace and Mayne won't spare his coal. I reckon we'll hear from him soon."

Adam stopped and Kit, seeing that it cost him an effort to talk, took the president away. They met the doctor on the stairs and Kit waited at the bottom until he came down. Señor Martin was a fat, dark-skinned, Spanish creole.

"Your uncle is an obstinate man and will not take a hint," he remarked. "I had some trouble to save him and he may not escape next time."

"Then, you imagine there will be another time?"

Señor Martin shrugged expressively, "I am a doctor not a politician, but in this country much depends upon the risk of being found out. Señor Askew is old and not strong. One must pay for leading a strenuous life and he has had malaria for some years. He ought to leave and stop in the north. It is your business to persuade him, but do not disturb him yet."

"I will try," Kit said doubtfully. "You think it needful?"

"If he does not go soon, he will not go at all," the doctor replied in a meaning tone.

He went away and some time afterwards Kit returned to his uncle's room. The shutters were pushed back from the balcony window and the strong light, reflected by the white wall, showed the thinness of Adam's figure and the deep lines on his face. His skin was a curious yellow colour and his eyes were dull.

"You haven't been well for some time and the stuff you got last night has shaken you rather badly," Kit remarked with a touch of embarrassment. "I think you ought to go back with Mayne."

"You imagine you can manage things better without me?" Adam rejoined.

"No," said Kit colouring. "It's a big and awkward job, but perhaps I can manage. I feel you ought to go."

"It looks as if the doctor had put you on my track. He's been arguing with me. What did he say?"

Kit hesitated and Adam smiled. "I can guess, partner,

and perhaps he was right. Well, I'm getting old and have a notion I won't live long, anyway. Don't see that it matters much if I go or stop, and I've a reason for stopping you don't know yet. Besides, I hate to be beaten, and mean to put over my last big job." He paused and gave Kit a steady look. "There's one drawback; putting over may cost you something."

"That doesn't count," Kit said quietly. "What you have is yours; I expect you earned it hard."

"I certainly did," Adam agreed. "I earned part of what I've got by jobs that cost me more than my health. I'd wipe out some of my early deals, if I could. Well, I don't know if playing a straight game on a losing hand will cancel past mistakes but I feel I've got to play it out. My wad and yours are in the pool."

"It's not my wad," Kit objected. "You have treated me generously."

Next day Adam was obviously worse, and when two or three more had passed the doctor looked anxious. Then, one hot evening, the president brought Kit a letter addressed to his uncle.

"Don Adam is asleep and must not be disturbed," he said. "Perhaps you had better read this. It may be about the *Rio Negro*."

The letter was from Mayne, who stated that he had met bad weather soon after leaving port, and the racing of the engines in a heavy sea had caused some damage He had, however, reached Havana, where he had received the Spanish money, and did not know what to do. Some time would be required to repair the damage, but it would be risky to resume the voyage with disabled engines. Kit gave the letter to the president, whose dark face flushed, and for a few moments he stormed with Spanish fury.

"This dog of a sailor has been bought!" he cried, clenching his hands as he walked about the floor. "If the money does not arrive soon, it will be too late; my soldiers will not take our notes. Galdar has paid him to ruin me."

Kit, knowing the emotional character of the half-breeds, let him rage. Alvarez did not often lose his self-control, and he had some grounds for feeling disturbed. When he

stopped, Kit said quietly, The captain is honest, but if he loses his ship with the guns and the money on board, it will not help us much. If my uncle is better in the morning, I will see what he thinks ; if not, I will decide about the orders to send."

When Alvarez left him he went into the town and after walking about the alameda sat down at a table in front of the café and ordered some wine. This was safer than the black coffee and scented cordials the citizens drank, but he tasted it carefully and gave himself up to anxious thought without draining his glass. The insurance on the *Rio Negro* did not cover all the risks Mayne would run if he left port, with disabled engines, and the coast was dangerous. The loss of the ship would be a blow, but if Mayne did not leave Havana soon the freight might arrive after the president's fall. Kit, feeling his responsibility, shrank from the momentous choice, and while he pondered Olsen came up and occupied a chair opposite.

" Drinking *tinto !* " he remarked. " Well, I guess that's prudent. But how's the Buccaneer ? He's been looking shaky and I heard he was ill."

Kit wondered how much Olsen knew. He said Adam's fever came and went, and he would, no doubt, be better soon. Olsen smiled and shook his head.

" There's no use in giving me that stuff ; I know the climate ! Askew's going under fast and will never be fit again. I reckon the old man knows he's got to let up, if you don't. What are you going to do when he pulls out ? "

" It will need some thought," Kit answered cautiously since he had grounds for believing the other imagined he was Adam's clerk.

Olsen ordered some vermouth, and then remarked in a meaning tone : " I don't have to be careful about my drinks. There's an advantage in taking the popular side."

Kit signed him to go on and Olsen resumed : " The Buccaneer will drop out soon and you'll be left to do the best you can for yourself. Well, I don't suppose you'll get another chance like this ; we'll pay you ten thousand dollars if you can keep the *Rio Negro* back for a week."

" That doesn't indicate that you're sure of winning,"

Kit remarked dryly. "Besides, I wouldn't trust Galdar to put up the dollars."

"I don't ask you to trust Galdar; my people will find the money. In a sense, it doesn't matter to us who is president, except that we want the concessions Galdar promised, and they're worth an extra two thousand pounds. We'll give you American bills for the sum if your steamer lands her cargo too late to be of use."

It looked as if Olsen knew the *Rio Negro* had broken down. If so, he was obviously well informed, and his employers were persuaded that the probability of the president's downfall was strong enough to justify the bribe. Two thousand pounds would go some way to making Ashness a model farm, while it was plain that Adam might lose the money he had hinted he meant to leave Kit. Kit, however, did not feel tempted, although he wanted to find out something about Olsen's plans.

"Anyhow, you must give me until the morning. I want to think about it," he said, in order to test his suspicions.

"We can't wait; the thing must be put over now. There's no use in trying to raise my offer. You know our limit."

"Oh, well!" said Kit, "I'm afraid I'll have to let it go. There are difficulties, and if you can't wait——"

Olsen looked at him with surprise, and Kit saw he had not expected his offer to be refused.

"You don't mean you're going to turn my offer down?" Olsen said sharply.

"You force me. I can't decide just yet."

Olsen hesitated, knitting his brows. "Oh!" he exclaimed, "that's ridiculous! The thing will cost you nothing and I'll come up a thousand dollars. You ought to see you must accept."

"I don't see," Kit replied, as carelessly as he could, and got up. "Since you can't wait, I understand the matter's off."

CHAPTER VI

THE PRESIDENT'S WATCHERS

WHEN Kit was half way across the alameda he stopped and looked about.

Since he had refused Olsen's offer, caution was advisable, because Kit felt sure the fellow had expected him to agree, and it was obvious that he knew enough to make him dangerous. He distrusted Olsen, who was not a native American, and probably not a Norwegian, as he pretended. There was a mystery about his employers, but Kit suspected that they were Germans, and as a rule the latter's commercial intrigues were marked by an unscrupulous cunning of which few of their rivals seemed capable. This was admitting much, since the foreign adventurers did not claim high principles.

On the surface, it was obviously prudent to take the shortest line to the presidio, but Kit reflected that Olsen would expect him to do so. It might be better to put him off the track by going another way, and Kit was anxious to know if he had left the café. Stepping back into the shadow, he made for another path and a few minutes afterwards returned to the street. He glanced at the café as he walked past and saw that Olsen was not there. He thought this ominous, since it indicated that the fellow had gone to consult his revolutionary friends and Kit imagined they would try to prevent his reaching the presidio. He seldom carried a pistol, which was difficult to hide when one wore thin white clothes. On the whole, he had found a suspicious bulge in one's pocket rather apt to provoke than save one from attack; but he was sorry he had not a pistol now. Kit went back across the alameda, hoping he had put Olsen's friends off the track. If so, he would be safe until he got near the presidio, when he must be cautious. He passed two or three groups of people, and now and then heard steps behind, but the steps were followed by voices that relieved his anxiety. For all that, he was glad to leave the alameda and turn up a street.

The street was narrow, hot, and dirty. There was a smell of decaying rubbish and the rancid oil used in cooking. Perspiration trickled down his face and he felt an unpleasant nervous tension. Yet nobody came near him and when he cautiously glanced round nobody was lurking in the gloom. He began to think he had cheated Olsen, but admitted that it was too soon to slacken his watchfulness.

At one corner, he saw two figures in shabby white uniform and hesitated. In Spanish-American countries, the government generally maintains a force of carefully picked men, entrusted with powers that are seldom given to ordinary police. They patrol in couples, carry arms, and are sometimes called *guardias civiles* and sometimes *rurales*. Kit knew he could trust the men, but doubted if they could leave their post; besides he did not want Olsen to know he thought it needful to ask for protection. Now he came to think of it he had seen the *rurales* outside the café and at another corner. Perhaps this was why he had been left alone.

He went on, rather reluctantly, and by and by reached the broad square in front of the presidio. The old building was clear in the moonlight; Kit could see a sentry on the terrace and a faint glow in the slit in the wall that marked Adam's room. It was hardly two hundred yards off and he would be safe before he reached the arch, but a grove of small palms and shrubs ran between him and the square. There were rails behind the trees and the nearest opening was some distance off. A high blank wall threw a dark shadow that stretched across the road by the rails and met the gloom of the trees.

Kit looked about, without stopping or turning his head much. There was nobody in sight, but he somehow felt that he was not alone. It was a disturbing, and apparently an illogical, feeling that he must not indulge, and pulling himself together he went on, with his fist clenched. He was not far from the gate, and although he listened hard could only hear his own steps, and voices in a neighbouring street. Yet his nerves tingled and his muscles got tense. In front a thick, dark mass that looked like a clump of euphorbia or cactus stood beside the path, and just beyond it a bright

beam of moonlight shone between the drooping branches of the palms.

He thought the spot the beam touched was dangerous. As he crossed it his figure would be strongly illuminated and he would have his back to the dark bush. He wanted to move aside and go round the latter, but this might give somebody time to spring out and get between him and the gate. The gate was close by and he was strangely anxious to reach it. For all that, he was not going to indulge his imagination.

He plunged into the gloom, without deviating from his path, and conquered a nervous inpulse that urged him to run. When he had nearly passed the bush he thought he heard a movement and a thick stalk of the cactus shook.

Half instinctively, Kit leaped forward and felt something soft brush against his shoulder. As he swung round, in the moonlight, with his mouth set and his hand drawn back to strike, he saw a blanket on the ground. There was nothing else and he breathed hard as he searched the gloom. The blanket had not been there before. Next moment, a dark figure sprang from the shadow and a knife flashed in the moonlight; then he heard a heavy report and a puff of smoke blew past his head. The figure swerved and, staggering awkwardly, fell heavily. It did not move afterwards, and while Kit gazed at it dully a man in white uniform ran past and stooped beside the fellow on the ground. Kit vacantly noted that a little smoke curled from the muzzle of his pistol.

"One cartridge is enough," he said coolly. Your worship did not escape by much.

Another *rural* came out of the bushes and when they turned over the body Kit saw a dark face and a long, thin knife clenched in a brown hand. He understood now that the blanket had been meant to entangle his arm or head; half-breed peons often carry a rolled-up blanket of good quality on their shoulders.

"It is Gil Ortega," the *rural* remarked. "A good shot that will save us some trouble, comrade!"

"How did you come here when you were wanted?" Kit asked as calmly as he could.

The *rural* smiled. "By the president's order, señor. We were watching the café."

"But it looks as if you had got in front of me."

"It is so, señor. We thought it best to follow this fellow. He lost you when you turned back."

Kit nodded, for he remembered that he had instinctively avoided one or two dark lanes that would have given him a shorter line than the streets. Ortega and the *rurales* had taken the shorter way.

After a time, he went to look for Alvarez and found him sitting in front of a table in the patio. A soldier stood not far off, but the president was alone and the light of a shaded lamp fell upon a bundle of letters and documents. Alvarez worked hard and had inherited a rather austere simplicity from his Indian ancestors. Kit thought his plain white clothes and quiet calm gave him dignity.

"It looks as if my enemies meant to lose no time," he said, in English, when Kit told him about his adventure.

"It's their third try in a few weeks," Kit agreed.

"Don't you find the uncertainty about where they'll strike next rather wearing?"

Alvarez shrugged. "One gets used to these affairs; a custom of the country, and there is something to be said for it. If the plot succeeds, it is an easy way of turning out a president and changing the government. Perhaps it is better to kill a man or two than fight round barricades and burn the town."

"In the North, we find it possible to change our government by vote."

"You are cold-blooded people and don't understand the passions of the South," Alvarez rejoined with cynical humour. "We have tried your plan, but one must be rich to buy the votes. Besides, if one is beaten at the polls, there remains the last appeal to the knife. But we will let this go. We have something else to talk about."

"That is so," said Kit. "To begin with, I must thank you for sending your *rurales* to look after me."

"It is nothing," Alvarez replied in a deprecatory tone. "You are my guest and we try to take care of foreigners, because if they meet with accidents their consuls ask em-

barrassing questions. Besides, watching them serves two objects."

"Then, I expect you know I met Olsen at the café?" Kit suggested dryly.

Alvarez smiled. "Yes; I know. But I was not suspicious."

"After all, one doesn't generally conspire in a public place. In fact, I don't understand why Olsen met me there."

"He may have meant to compromise you; to put doubts in my mind."

"It's possible, now I think of it," Kit assented. "I hope he didn't succeed."

"I know my friends, Don Cristoval. But what did the fellow want? I do not know all."

"Your spies are pretty smart, but I expect our colloquial English puzzled them," Kit remarked smiling. "However, I was going to tell you——"

He narrated what Olsen had said, and Alvarez looked thoughtful.

"Galder must be nearly ready; he has been quicker than I imagined. What are you going to do about the steamer?"

"I'll wait until to-morrow. If my uncle is well enough, he must decide."

"But if he is no better?" Alvarez asked.

Kit gave him a level glance. "Then I will send Mayne orders to run all risks and start, whether his engines are repaired or not."

Next morning Kit found Adam lying half awake after a night of delirium. The old man's eyes were heavy, his brain was dull, and the doctor, who came in, made Kit a sign not to disturb him. Kit went out and spent some time writing a message to Mayne. It was necessary that the captain should know what he must do, but Kit was anxious to give no hint about the importance of speed that others would understand. He meant to guard against his orders being read by spies in Olsen's pay.

When he had sealed the envelope and addressed it as the president had told him, he went down to the patio and found a peon talking to a guard.

"This man is the mate of the *Catalina* and wants to see you," said the guard, and as he went off Kit turned to the other, who looked like a sailor.

"My wife lives in the town and I have been at home for a day or two," the man said. "I am going back to the schooner now and was told you had a letter for the *patron*."

Kit put his hand in his pocket. Although he had expected the mayor-domo would come for the message, there was not much formality at the presidio, and the fellow was obviously a sailor. Yet Kit hesitated and as he stood with his hand on the envelope thought the other's eyelids flickered. The flicker was almost too slight to notice, but it hinted at nervousness and Kit dropped the message back.

"Very well," he said. "Wait a few minutes."

He went along the arcade and stopping near the end looked back. The sailor had sat down on a bench and was lighting a cigarette. This looked as if he did not mind waiting, and Kit wondered whether it was worth while to disturb the president, who was occupied. He went on, however, and Alvarez signed him to sit down when he entered his room. After a minute or two, he put down the document he was reading to his secretary.

"Well," he said, "have you written your message for Captain Mayne?"

"It is here. The *Catalina's* mate is waiting."

Alvarez turned to the secretary. "My order was that the *patron* should come."

"That is so, señor. I sent him word."

"The man told me his wife lived in the town and he was starting back," Kit interposed.

"The *patron* has a house here," Alvarez replied. "We will see the man. But first send an order to the guard to let nobody go out."

He waited for a minute after the secretary went off and then beckoned Kit, who followed him downstairs and into the arcade. When they reached it Kit stopped and Alvarez turned to him with a meaning smile. There was nobody on the bench.

"It looks as if my order was sent too late," Alvarez

remarked. "You had better tell me exactly what happened."

Kit complied, and Alvarez sent for the guard and asked: "How did you know the sailor was the *Catalina's* mate?"

"He told me he was, señor. Afterwards, when Don Cristoval did not come back, he said it was not important and he would not wait."

Alvarez dismissed the man and shrugged as he turned to Kit. "The plotters are clever, but they made a mistake. The fellow was too modest; he ought to have said he was the *patron*. Well, we must try to find him, although I expect we are late. Now give me the message for Captain Mayne. It looks as if our antagonists knew its importance."

Kit gave him the envelope and went back to Adam's room.

CHAPTER VII

ADAM RESUMES CONTROL

ALTHOUGH the shutters on the balcony window were open no draught entered the small, bare room and the heat that soaked through the thick walls was nearly intolerable. There was not a sound in the presidio and a drowsy quietness brooded over the dazzling town. It was two o'clock in the afternoon, and the citizens were resting in their darkened houses until the sun got low and work and intrigue began again. Adam and Kit, however, had been talking for some time when the former, leaning back in a big cane chair, frowned at his nephew. His thin face was wet with sweat, but he shivered and his hands shook.

"You can quit arguing; I've got to go," he said. "I don't get much better, anyhow, and can't stand for lying off when there's a big job to be done."

"It's doubtful if you can get about," Kit insisted.

"I'm going to try. You'll have a quiet mule ready when it's getting dark, and I'll ride out of town; then, if the saddle shakes me, I'll go in a hammock. You can cut out your objections. The thing's fixed."

"Very well," said Kit. "We had better make for Corrientes, since the point commands the port and the lagoon. Mayne will stop for an hour or two, looking for a signal, when he picks up his marks."

"We'll start for the port and take the other track afterwards. There's no use in telling the opposition where we're going. I imagine they don't know if the *Rio Negro* has sailed or not."

"For that matter, we don't know," Kit remarked.

"Oh, shucks!" Adam exclaimed. 'Mayne understands what we're up against and he'd pull out when he got your telegram. If he can't use his damaged engine, he'll disconnect and bring her along with the other." He stopped Kit with a frown. "If you're going to tell me the *Rio Negro* can't steam across on one cylinder, you can cut it out. I've taught the men I put in charge that when a job's needful it has to be done."

He paused, and when Kit said nothing, went on quietly: "Well, I reckon Galdar's crowd will expect the boat to make for the port. It's easier to land cargo there and there's a better road. With good luck, we'll have the goods delivered before they know she's gone to the lagoon. Now you can go along and get busy."

At dusk a few barefooted soldiers paraded on the terrace, with two mules and three or four peons. Since it was impossible to evade the watchfulness of Galdar's spies, Adam had resolved to set off openly and not to give them a hint that his journey had an important object by trying to hide it. He mounted awkwardly, with an obvious effort, and when he was in the saddle set his lips for a moment or two. Then he turned to Alvarez and smiled.

"I'm not a back-number yet, but it's lucky the opposition don't know how hard it was for me to get up."

Alvarez made a sign of understanding. "You must dismount as soon as possible. You are very staunch, my friend."

"I've got to make good. If everything is fixed, we'll pull out."

"*Adios, senores,*" said Alvarez, taking off his hat. "Much depends on you."

Somebody gave an order, there was a rattle of thrown-up rifles, a patter of naked feet, and the party moved away. Kit, turning after a few moments, looked back. He saw the long, straight building, pierced here and there by lights, rise against the orange sky, and the president's tall figure, conspicuous in white clothes, in front of the arch. His attendants had vanished, he stood motionless, as if brooding, and Kit thought he looked pathetic and lonely. He afterwards remembered his glance at the old presidio.

After leaving the streets, they followed the road to the port for some distance, and then turned into a track that wound along a dark hillside among clumps of trees. When they entered it, Adam stopped his mule and got down awkwardly.

"I've had about as much as I can stand for," he remarked, breathing hard. "Looks as if we had got a start, but I reckon the other lot will try to track us to the port when the moon gets up."

Then with a sigh of relief he lay down in a hammock the peons had got ready, and when two of the latter took up the poles they went on again.

On the second night after leaving the presidio, Kit sat on the coaming of a small steam launch that lurched across the long undulations rolling in from the Caribbean. It had been blowing fresh, and although the wind had dropped the swell ran high. When the launch swung up, a vague, hazy smear rather suggested than indicated land astern; the sea ahead was dark, but in one place a faint reflection on the sky told that the moon would soon rise. Although the beach was some distance off, a dull monotonous rumble, broken now and then by the clank of the launch's engines, hinted at breaking surf. The furnace door was open and the red light touched Adam's face as he sat, supported by a cushion, in a corner of the cockpit. He looked very haggard and Kit thought him the worse for his journey.

"The light's in my eyes, but there was nothing on the

skyline a minute or two ago," Kit remarked. "It will be awkward if Mayne doesn't get across. You seem persuaded he'll come."

"I know he'd start. We can't tell what may have happened afterwards and there was more wind than I liked. He'll be here on time, if he's been able to keep the old boat off the ground."

"Time is getting short. I expect the rebels have found out we're not at the port and Galdar will have the road watched when the news gets to the town. It might pay him to risk forcing a conflict if he could seize the convoy, and I'll feel happier when the guns and the money are off our hands. It will be the president's business to look after them then."

"That is so," Adam agreed. "Our part of the job's to land the goods, and it's unlucky the tides are small. There won't be much water on the shoals and although we'll have an extra few inches to-morrow, I don't want Mayne to wait."

Kit pondered, for he had taken some soundings when coming out. They were probably not correct, because the launch had rolled among the white combers that swept the shoals while he used the lead, but the average depth was about the steamer's draught in her usual trim. Mayne, however, ought to know what depth to expect, and Kit hoped he had loaded the vessel to correspond. By and by the mulatto fireman shut the furnace door, the puzzling light was cut off, and Kit searched the horizon. For some minutes he saw nothing; and then a trail of red fire soared into the sky.

"He's brought her across," said Adam. "Get our rocket off."

The rocket swept up in a wide curve and burst into crimson lights. After this, there was darkness for a time until an indistinct black object appeared against the brightening sky. Then the launch sank back into the trough, where the gloom was only broken by the glimmer of the phosphorescence that spangled the water. When she swung up on the top of the next swell the steamer was plainer and Kit blew the whistle as he changed their course.

When the moon rose slowly out of the sea he stopped the

clanking engine and the launch reeled up and down, some fifty yards off the steamer. The *Rio Negro* carried no lights, but the phosphorescence shone upon her wet plates as she rolled them out of the water. Her side rose high and black, and then sank until her rail was nearly level with the spangled foam. Indistinct figures scrambled about her deck, and when Kit sheered the launch in her ladder went down with a rattle. A half-breed on board the launch caught it with his boathook, and Adam stood at the bow, waiting for a chance to jump upon the narrow platform that lurched up above him and then plunged into the sea. Kit felt anxious. He did not think Adam was equal to the effort and dreaded the consequences of the shock if he missed and fell.

"Stand by!" he shouted to the seamen on the ladder when the *Rio Negro* steadied after a violent roll; and then touched Adam. "Now; before she goes back!"

Adam, jumping awkwardly, seized the seaman's hand, and Kit, leaning out, pushed him on to the platform as it began to sink. Then he jumped and coming down in a foot or two of water helped Adam to the deck. Mayne met them at the gangway and took them to his room, where Adam sat down and gasped. When Mayne poured out some liquor he clutched the glass with a shaking hand. After he drained it he was silent for a moment or two; and then asked in a strained voice: "Have you brought the goods?"

"Got them all. We hadn't a nice trip. Don't know how Finlay kept her going and I thought I'd lost her on Tortillas reef; but we can talk about that afterwards."

Adam made a sign of satisfaction and leaned back feebly. "It's some relief to know the goods are here."

"Finlay can drive her seven knots and has plenty steam," Mayne said to Kit. "I'm bothered about the water; there won't be too much."

Kit asked the vessel's draught and looked thoughtful when he heard what it was.

"I can't guarantee my soundings, but imagine she won't float across and an ugly sea is running on the bar."

"She'll certainly hit the bottom and the chances are she hits it hard," Mayne remarked when Kit told him the depth

he had got. "I expect, too, the mist will drift off from the mangroves with the land-breeze and hide our marks." He paused and glanced at Adam, who leaned back in a corner with his eyes half shut. "But I reckon we have got to take her in?"

"Yes," said Adam dully. "Leave me alone; you can fix things with Kit."

Mayne beckoned Kit and they went to the bridge. The moon had risen and threw a belt of silver light across the sea, but it was a half-moon and would not help them much. Ahead, in the distance, grey haze obscured the water, and the dull roar that came out of the mist had got distinct. Mayne rang his telegraph to reduce the speed.

"So far as I can reckon, it won't be high-water for most two hours, and on this coast you can't calculate just how much the tide will rise. There's going to be trouble if we find it shoaler than we expect and I had plenty trouble coming along. Finlay could hardly drive her four knots in last night's breeze and the current put us on Tortillas reef. She stopped there twenty minutes, jambed down on her bilge while the sea came on board."

Kit noted two boats that had obviously been damaged while the steamer hammered on the reef, and the white crust of salt on the funnel; but Mayne resumed: "Say, the old man looks shaky; never seen him like that. You want to get him home."

"He won't go. However, he's rather worse to-night. I think he was anxious about your turning up in time to catch the tide. The journey tried him and now a reaction has begun."

"Well, I allow there's not much use in arguing if he means to stop; but he needn't have bothered about my getting across. When the orders came, I knew I had to bring her or pile her up. What Askew says goes."

They were silent for a time while the *Rio Negro*, with engines throbbing slowly, crept towards the coast. The launch had vanished, and there was no guiding light in the mist. The turmoil of the surf had got louder and rang through the dark like the roar of a heavy train. Presently

Mayne ordered a sounding to be taken and looked at Kit when the leadsman called the depth.

"A foot less than we reckoned, and there won't be much rise. I don't like it, Mr. Askew, and if my employer was not your uncle, I'd heave the old boat round."

Kit nodded sympathetically. He felt he hated the smothering haze that rolled in front and hid the dangers, but they must go on and trust to luck. He knew Adam's plans and no arguments would shake his resolve. Half an hour later a twinkle broke out some distance ahead and Mayne rang his telegraph.

"I'm thankful for that, anyhow," he remarked. "We'll let her go, but I have my doubts about what will happen next."

The throb of engines quickened, the gurgle of water got louder at the bows, and the *Rio Negro*, lurching sharply, went shorewards with tide and swell. The twinkle vanished and reappeared, to starboard now, and chains rattled as the quartermaster pulled round the wheel. Then the light faded and they were left without a guide in the puzzling haze. Ten minutes afterwards there was a heavy shock, and a rush of foam swept the rail as the steamer listed down. She lifted and struck again with a jar that tried Kit's nerve. A hoarse shout came from the forecastle and men ran about the slanted deck as a frothing sea rolled on board. Mayne, clutching his telegraph, beckoned Kit.

"Bring Mr. Askew up. He's got to tell me what I am to do."

Kit met Adam clumsily climbing the ladder, and when he helped him to the bridge Mayne remarked: "She's on the tongue shoal. Don't know if I can back her off and steam out to deep water, but, if you consent, I want to try."

"I won't consent," said Adam. "We're going in! What's that light to starboard?"

"The launch; she's in the channel. I doubt if there's water enough for us, if we can get there."

"Then, shove her across the sand or let her go to bits."

Mayne rang the telegraph and touched his cap. "Very

well! She's your ship, and we have some sound boats left."

For the next ten minutes Kit clung to the bridge. He wanted to help Adam into the pilot-house, but the old man waved him off. Clouds of spray swept the vessel and made it hard to see her rail where the white combers leaped. Now and then one broke on board and poured in a foaming torrent across the slanted deck; she trembled horribly as she struck the sand. It looked as if she were driving sideways across the shoal, but the flare on the launch had gone out and Kit doubted if Mayne knew where he was.

Sometimes the tall, black forecastle swung in a quarter-circle; sometimes the stern went round. For the most part, however, she lay with her side to the rollers and it was plain that the struggle could not last long. If they did not get off in a few minutes, rivets would smash and butts open, and one must take one's chance in the boats. Two were damaged, but others might be launched, and Kit was relieved to note that two or three deck-hands moved about as if engaged in clearing the davit-tackles. He sympathised with the men, although he did not think Mayne had given them orders.

In the meantime Adam clung to the rails, swaying when the bridge slanted, but looking unmoved, and Kit knew that so long as the *Rio Negro's* engines turned he would go on. It was not for nothing men called him the Buccaneer, and now that he was staking his life and fortune on a hazardous chance there was something daunting about his grim resolve.

A sea rolled up astern and buried the poop. Kit felt the steamer lift and turn, as if on a pivot at the middle of her length. The after-deck was full of water, but the bows were high and going round, and he was conscious of a curious shiver that ran through the straining hull as she shook herself free from the sand. She crawled forward, stopped, and moved again with a staggering lurch. The next sea swept her on, but she did not strike, and after a few moments Kit knew she had crossed the top of the shoal.

Her whistle shrieked above the turmoil of the sea, a light blinked in the spray, and she lurched on before the tumbling combers. By and by the water got smooth and an indistinct dark mass grew out of the mist. Mayne, who was

pacing up and down the bridge, stopped near Kit with a reckless laugh.

"This is the kind of navigation they break skippers for! If those are the mangroves on False Point, I may take her in; if they're not, we'll make a hole in the forest."

Kit looked about, but could not see the launch. The dark mass was a thick belt of trees, but he did not know, and did not think Mayne knew, where they were, and the easy motion indicated that the tide was carrying the steamer on. Much to his relief, the indistinct wall of forest seemed to bend back, away from the sea. It looked as if they were entering the lagoon; and then he heard the telegraph and the rattle of rudder chains.

The screw shook the vessel as it span hard-astern, and the bows began to swing. It was, however, too late; the forecastle would not clear the mangroves, and Kit knew the water was deep among their roots. Shouting to Adam he seized the rails and waited for the shock. It came, for there was a crash, and a noise of branches breaking. The steamer rolled, recoiled, and forged on into the forest.

Some minutes later, Mayne stopped his engines and there was a curious quietness as he came up to Adam.

"We are fast in the mud, sir. Although she'll take a list when the tide falls, we may be able to work cargo. I'll lay out an anchor in the morning and try to heave her off, but I calculate it will be full moon before she floats."

CHAPTER VIII

THE MANGROVE SWAMP

EARLY next morning, Kit went on deck. Although it was hot, everything dripped with damp and sour-smelling mist drifted past the ship. Her masts and funnels slanted and Kit could hardly keep his footing on the inclined deck. When he looked over the rail, the rows of wet plates

ran up like a wall above broken mangrove roots and pools of slime. Smashed trunks and branches were piled against the bows and dingy foliage overhung the vessel's lower side.

Kit walked aft. The screw was uncovered, and shallow, muddy water, dotted by floating scum, surrounded the stern, which projected into the lagoon. In one place, however, a mud-bank touched the bilge, and three or four men, standing on planks, cautiously tried its firmness. They were wet and splashed, and one who ventured a few yards from the plank sank to his waist. The others pulled him out and then they climbed a rope ladder. Kit thought the experiment proved that nothing useful could be done until the tide flowed round the ship.

Another gang was moving a kedge-anchor across the deck, while a few more coiled heavy ropes beside the winch Mayne obviously meant to try to heave the vessel off, but Kit thought he would not succeed until the moon was full. In the meantime, cargo could only be landed when there was water enough to float boats up to the ship, and Kit glanced across the lagoon. There were no mangroves on the other side, although thick timber grew close down to a belt of sand. Below this was mud, across which he imagined heavy goods could not be carried. The heat and steamy damp made him languid, and he went to Adam's room. Adam had got up and sat, half-dressed, on the lower berth with a glass on the floor close by. His hands shook and there was no colour in his lips.

"It's rather early for a strong cocktail, but I felt I needed bracing," he said. "What do you think about our chance of getting her off?"

"I imagine it's impossible for another week, and don't see how we'll get the cargo out."

"Don't you?" said Adam grimly. "It has got to be done. If Mayne finds the job too big, I'll put it through myself."

"You ought to leave before the malaria knocks you down," Kit rejoined. "If I had the power, I'd make you go."

Adam smiled. "You mean well, boy, but you don't understand, and if you plot with Mayne to bluff me, I'll

surely break you both. Now go and see if the president's men have arrived. Then you can tell Mayne to rig his derricks and take the hatches off."

Kit went out and after a time three or four figures appeared among the trees across the lagoon. They came down to the mud, but when Kit shouted, asking if they could launch a canoe, one shrugged and they turned back.

"I reckon the old man means us to get busy with the cargo," Mayne remarked.

"Yes," said Kit. "I understand he's ready to undertake the job if we find it too much for us."

"He's a hustler, sure! So far as I can see, the thing can't be done, but if Askew wants it done, I guess we've got to try. We'll carry out the kedge and make fast a warp or two when the tide flows. He'll expect it, though I don't reckon much on our chance of floating her."

By degrees the muddy water crawled up the plates and the *Rio Negro* rose upright; the haze melted and it got fiercely hot when she sun shone. A canoe, manned by half-breed peons, crossed the lagoon, and with heavy labour the kedge-anchor was hoisted out and hung between two boats. Half-naked men toiled at the oars until the lashings were cut and the boats rocked as the anchor sank. Then their crews, dragging large stiff warps, forced their way among the mangrove roots and made the ropes fast where they could. They came back exhausted, dripping with water and daubed by slime, and Mayne went to the bridge.

The sun pierced the narrow awning and there was not a breath of wind. The lagoon shone with dazzling brightness and the iron deck threw up an intolerable heat. Kit felt the perspiration soak his thin clothes, and big drops of moisture trickled down Adam's yellow face as he sat, with half-shut eyes, in a canvas chair. By and by he took out his watch, and Kit noted that he moved it once or twice before he could see the time.

"Hadn't you better get busy?" he asked Mayne.

The telegraph clanged, the engines panted, and the *Rio Negro* began to shake as the screw revolved. There was no movement but the racking throb, until Mayne raised his hand and winch and windlass rattled. Puffs of steam blew

about, the cable rose from the water with a jar, and the warps ran slowly across the winch-drums, foul with greasy scum.

"Hold on to it!" Mayne shouted. "Get in the last inch!"

His voice was drowned by the rattle of chain and hiss of steam, but the uproar began to die away and the sharp clatter of small engines changed to spasmodic jars. Then somebody shouted, there was a crash, and the end of a broken warp, flying back, tore up the dazzling water. The windlass stopped, and a few moments later a clump of mangroves swayed. Kit heard green wood crack, as a rope that had stretched and strained began to move. Then Mayne raised his hand.

"Let go; stop her! You're pulling up the trees."

There was sudden quietness except for the insistent throb of the screw, and Mayne turned to Adam.

"If the cable holds, I can smash the windlass, but I can't heave her off."

"Very well. You can quit and get the cargo out. Better hustle while she's upright."

Mayne went down the ladder, and when he unlocked the iron door of the after wheel-house a gang of men brought out a row of small boxes. A mulatto from the beach, who wore neat white clothes and an expensive hat, counted the boxes and gave Adam a receipt.

"Don Hernando will be glad to get these goods, and we will start at once," he said. "Although I have a guard, it will be safer to reach the town before the president's enemies know."

"That would be prudent, señor," Adam agreed, and turned to Kit when the mulatto went away.

"I have done my part and it's Alvarez's business to see the chests get through. Well, we have both taken some chances since he was a Customs clerk and I a *contrabandista* running the old *Mercedes*, but I reckon this is my rashest plunge. Anyhow, if I get my money back or not, I've put up the goods. Now you can tell Mayne to break out the guns."

Mayne gave orders, derrick-booms swung from the stumpy

masts, pullies rattled, and heavy cases rose from the holds. The boats, however, could not get abreast of the forward hatch and the cases had to be moved across slippery iron plates to the after derrick that hoisted them overboard. It was exhausting work, and the heat was intolerable.

At noon, the peons refused another load and when Adam addressed them in virulent Castillian, coolly pulled the boats away from the ship. When they had rowed a short distance they stopped and one got up.

"More is not possible, señor," he said. "To work in this sun is not for flesh and blood. After we have slept for an hour or two, we will come back."

Adam felt for his pistol, but hesitated, with his hand at his silk belt, and Kit thought he looked very like a Buccaneer.

"It might pay to plug that fellow, and I'd have risked it when I came here in the *Mercedes*. Still, I guess Don Hernando has enough trouble."

Mayne, standing behind him, grinned. "I reckon that fixes the thing. Don't know I'm sorry the dagos have lit out; my crowd are used up and ready to mutiny."

For two hours the tired crew rested while the water sank and the steamer resumed her awkward list. Then the boats came back and the men crawled languidly about the slanted deck, until Adam went among them with bitter words.

Darkness spread swiftly across the lagoon and a white fog, hot and damp as steam, rose from the forest and hung about the ship. Everything was very quiet, for the men were too limp to talk, but a murmur came out of the distance where the long swell beat upon the shoals. Kit and Mayne sat in the chart-room, with a jug of iced liquor on the table in front. Sometimes they spoke a few words and sometimes smoked in silence, while Adam lay on the settee, saying nothing. At length, he got up and a steward helped him to his room. Somehow the others felt it a relief that he had gone.

"I can hustle, but your uncle makes me tired," Mayne remarked. "If you get what I mean, it's like watching a dead man chase the boys about; you feel it's unnatural to

see him on his feet. Well, one has to pay for fooling with a climate like this, and I'm afraid the bill he'll get will break him. Can't you make him quit ? "

" I can't ; I've tried."

" The curious thing is, he knows the cost," Mayne resumed. " Knows what's coming to him unless he goes."

" Yes," said Kit in a thoughtful voice, " I believe he does know and doesn't mind. This makes it rough on me. I'm powerless to send him off and I'm fond of the old man."

Mayne made a sign of agreement. " He's a pretty tough proposition and was worse when he was young ; but I've risked my life to serve him. The Buccaneer holds his friends."

Kit said nothing. He was anxious and depressed and soon went off to bed.

When work began next morning, Adam was on deck and superintended the landing of the cargo in spite of Kit's protest. Kit thought the day was hotter than the last, and after an hour or two's disturbed sleep in his stifling room found it hard to drag himself about. When the exhausted peons stopped at noon, he lay under the awning and kept close to Adam when they resumed. He did not like his uncle's fixed frown and thought it was caused by the effort he made to keep at work. If not, it was a hint of pain he stubbornly tried to overcome. Besides, his step was dragging and his movements were awkward.

About the middle of the afternoon, Adam stood near the noisy winch while a case was hoisted. The winch-man looked up when the heavy load, hanging from the derrick, swung across the slanted deck.

" Hold her while they steady the boom ! " Adam shouted and seized the rope that slipped round the drum.

The winch-driver was watching the others who struggled with the guy, and perhaps forgot it was not a strong man who had come to his help. For a moment or two Adam kept his grip, and then his hands opened and he staggered back. Somebody shouted, a pulley rattled, and the case, running down, crashed against the steamer's rail. Kit ran forward, but reached the spot a moment too late, for Adam lay unconscious on the iron deck.

They picked him up and carried him to the bridge, where it was a little cooler than his room, but for some time he did not open his eyes. Then he looked about dully and seeing Kit gave him a feeble smile.

"You're in charge now, partner; keep the boys hustling," he said. "There's the coffee to load up when you have put the guns ashore. Looks as if I had got to leave the job to you."

He turned his head, drew a hard breath, as if it had hurt him to speak, and said nothing more. The work, however, went on until it got dark, and when the mist rose from the mangroves and a heavy dew began to fall they carried Adam to his room. He slept for part of the night while Kit watched, but now and then tossed about with delirious mutterings. When morning came he did not wake, and Kit, looking at his pinched, wet face, went on deck with a heavy heart. He had sent for the Spanish doctor, but thought it did not matter much if Don Martin came or not. In another day or two he would be alone.

CHAPTER IX

ADAM'S LAST REQUEST

IT was nearly full moon, the night was calm, and the flowing tide rippled among the mangrove roots. Clammy vapour drifted about the ship and big drops fell from the rigging and splashed upon the deck. A plume of smoke went nearly straight up from the funnel, and now and then the clang of furnace-slice and shovel rose from the stokehold, for Mayne hoped to float the vessel next tide. For the most part, however, the men were asleep and it was very quiet in the room under the poop. A lamp tilted at a sharp angle gave a feeble light that touched Adam's face. Kit sat on a locker opposite, looking anxious and worn.

" You loaded up some of the coffee ? " Adam remarked in a strained voice.

" Half of it, I think ; the rest's on the beach," said Kit. " It's doubtful if we'll get the next lot, since Don Martin understands the fighting has begun."

" The lot you have shipped will be something to score against the account ; it's prime coffee and ought to sell well. I'd like you to get the rubber, but Alvarez can't wait long for the goods Mackellar has ready for the boat. Another voyage and you can pull out for the old country. I'd reckoned on going with you, but that's done with."

Kit said nothing. The doctor had come and gone, for he was needed elsewhere and could not help the sick man. One could indulge him and make things comfortable for a few days, but that was all, he said, and Kit saw that Adam knew. By and by the latter resumed :

" I've been thinking about Peter and Ashness. I'd have liked to see the old place and the fells again, and when I was half asleep I thought I heard the beck splash among the thorns and the pee-wits crying. Well, you are going back, and you'll marry that girl. Though it will cost you something to see Alvarez through, you ought to be rich enough."

" You mustn't talk too much," said Kit. " Señor Martin told you to rest."

Adam smiled. " It doesn't matter now if I rest or not. My brain's clearer and I'll talk while I can. I never told you much about my early life, but I'm going to do so, because there's something I want to ask."

" Then, you have only to ask it," Kit replied.

" I know," said Adam feebly. " You're staunch. Well, you have seen the dispatch-box in the office, marked *Hattie G.*, though I lost the old boat long before you came out. She was a coal-eater and didn't pay to run, but I kept her going until she hit the reef. My first steamboat—I got her when she was going cheap ; but she was bought with my wife's money, and called after her.

" I met Hattie in Florida about the year you were born. She was Vanhuyten's cousin and the finest thing that ever wore a woman's shape. Northern grit and Southern fire,

for she sprang from New England and good Virginia stock ; I've seen no woman with her superb confidence. Well, I was a *contrabandista* with some ugly tales against my name, but I fell in love with Hattie and married her in a month."

Adam was silent for a few minutes, and while Kit mused, shovels clinked in the stokehold and the vessel began to lift.

" I left her in a few weeks," Adam went on. " Alvarez was putting up for president and my few dollars were at stake. Hattie went home to Virginia while I helped Alvarez on the coast. He was hard up against it, though he's been president three times since. Well, when things looked blackest, I was knocked out in Salinas swamps, by fever and a bullet that touched my lungs. They took me to the old Indian mission—we were cut off from the ship—and Father Herman put the *rurales* off my track. I've sent him wine and candles, he's at the mission yet ; it stands between thick forest and swamps like this, and the padre's the only white man who has lived there long. Get down the chart and I'll show you the landing place."

Kit did so, feeling that he ought to indulge a sick man's caprice, and Adam, after giving him clear directions, was quiet for sôme minutes. Then he began again, with an effort :

" Vanhuyten told Hattie, and I found out afterwards that she had had trouble at home. Her folks had never trusted me and wanted to keep her back, but she had rich friends who sent her out, like an American princess, on a big steam yacht. She got to the mission when I was at my worst, and finding I could not be moved, sent the yacht away. It was some days before I knew she had come. There was no doctor to be got. Alvarez could not send help, and the government soldiers were hunting for his friends, but Father Herman knew something about medicine and Hattie helped him better than a trained nurse. I can see her now, going about the mud-walled room in her clean, white dress without a hint of weariness in her gentle eyes. That was when she thought I was watching, but sometimes at nights her head bent and her figure drooped.

" It was blisteringly hot and when the sun went down

the poisonous steam from the swamps drifted round the spot. Sometimes I begged her not to stop, and sometimes I raged, but Hattie could not be moved and my weak anger broke before her smiles. She was strong and would not get fever, she said; she had come to nurse me, and, if I insisted, would go home when I was well."

Adam stopped and asked for a drink, and afterwards Kit hoped he had gone to sleep, but he presently roused himself again.

"I have got to finish, partner, because there's a reason you should hear it all. By and by Father Herman had to nurse us both, and when I got better Hattie died. We buried her by torchlight in the dusty mission yard—she was a Catholic—you'll see the marble cross. I've been lonely ever since, and that's partly why I sent for you; Peter came next to Hattie and you are Peter's son. Now I'm ready to pull out, and somehow I think Hattie will find me when I'm wandering in the dark. Love like hers is strong. But I want you to listen when you have given me another drink."

Kit held the glass to Adam's cracked lips. He drank and lay still, breathing hard, and Kit heard the ripple of the tide. The *Rio Negro* was getting upright and as the lamp turned in its socket the light moved across the wall. After a time, Adam resumed in a clearer voice:

"All I have is yours; Mackellar will prove the will, but you'll see Alvarez out, as I meant to do. Another thing; Mayne will get the old boat off to-morrow, and when he's loaded up I want you to take me out and land me on the creek I marked behind Salinas Point. He can fly the flag half-mast; I'll have started on the lone trail then. You'll hire some half-breed boys at the *pueblo* in the swamp, and take me to the mission and lay me beside my wife. Hattie was a Catholic and you can tell Father Herman that what she believed was good enough for me. Afterwards, you'll send him now and then the box of candles he will tell you about. They're to burn in the little chapel before Our Lady of Sorrows, where Hattie used to pray I might get well. You'll do this for me?"

"I will," Kit answered with forced quietness.

"Then I've finished," said Adam. "I'm going to sleep now and mayn't talk much again."

He turned his head from the light and presently Kit, hearing him breathe quietly, went out on deck.

At high-water next day, the *Rio Negro* floated off the mud, and when she swung to her anchor Kit went into Adam's room. Adam was very weak, but looked up.

"Get the coffee on board; I'm afraid you won't have time for the next lot and the rubber," he said. "Tell Finlay to bank his fires. You'll want steam to take me out."

Kit understood, and nodded because he could not speak, and Adam, giving him a quiet smile, went to sleep again.

Some hours later, Mayne joined Kit, who had gone on deck for a few minutes.

"That's the last of the *hacienda Luisa* coffee," he said, indicating a boat alongside. "The peons tell me the next lot's coming down, but if we ship it, we'll miss the tide."

"You can close the hatches. The coffee must wait."

"It's high-grade stuff and brings top price. I don't like to leave it to spoil."

"We must risk that," Kit said quietly.

"There's another thing; Pedro, the clerk, reckons they are fighting near Salinas and the president's not popular in that neighbourhood. Looks as if you might have some trouble to take the old man to the mission."

"It's possible," said Kit. "I'm going to try. Have everything ready for us to get off to-night."

Mayne lifted his hand to his cap. "Very well, sir. We'll start as soon as there's water enough."

He went away, but Kit knew what he meant. The captain had done his duty by indicating obstacles, but he approved his new master's resolve and owned his authority. Kit was persuaded he would have Mayne's loyal help and went back to Adam's room. When it was getting dark, Adam moved his head as the engines began to throb and the propeller churned noisily in the shallow water. It stopped after a few turns and steam blew off.

"Finlay's giving her a trial spin," Adam remarked, in a very faint voice. "I see you've got things fixed and I'm

ready to start." He stopped and shut his eyes for a minute or two, and Kit did not know if he was conscious or not. Then he resumed in a strained whisper : " All's ready ; ring for full-speed. I'm going to meet my wife."

He drew a hard breath, sighed, and did not speak again. An hour afterwards, Mayne met Kit coming out of the room and glancing at his face took off his cap.

" I guess it hits you hard and I'll miss him, too," he said. " I'll not get another master like the Buccaneer."

He went off to give some orders and Kit sat down, feeling very desolate.

When the tide had risen and flowed past, oily smooth, under the full moon, the windlass began to rattle and the cable clanged. The anchor came up and when the engines shook the ship Mayne pulled the whistle-line and a long blast rolled across the woods. Next moment a rocket soared and burst in a shower of coloured lights.

" Vanhuyten and Askew's signal ! The head of the house is making his last trip," the captain remarked.

The echoes sank, the coloured lights burned out, and the measured beat of engines jarred upon the silence as the *Rio Negro* went to sea.

At sunrise, Mayne hoisted the house-flag, and the Stars and Stripes drooped languidly half way up the ensign staff, until the glassy calm broke and the sea breeze straightened the blue and silver folds. By and by he changed the course and mountains rose ahead, although a bank of cloud hid the plain and mangrove forest at their feet. In the afternoon, he searched the haze with his glasses, and getting a bearing stopped the engines near Salinas Point at dusk.

" If the weather's good, I'll wait three days," he said. " Then, if you send no word, I'll pull out for Havana and get the engines properly fixed. Better take this bag of Spanish dollars ; minted silver goes and you may find the dagos shy of the president's notes."

Kit took the money, a boat was swung out, and four sailors carried the plain, flag-wrapped coffin down the ladder. They were rough men, but Kit imagined he could trust them. Another crew picked up the oars, greasy caps were lifted, the *Rio Negro's* whistle screamed a last salute,

and the boat stole away. Mayne steamed off to anchor on good holding ground, and Kit sat at the tiller, with his eyes fixed on the misty coast.

It was dark when he heard breakers and saw the glimmer of surf. There were shoals all round him, but he had been told about a bay where a creek flowed through a sheltered channel. He did not know if he could find the channel, and if not the boat might be wrecked, but something must be left to luck, and they pulled on before the curling swell. She struck, and stopped until a comber rolled up astern. It broke and half buried her in rushing foam, but she lifted, lurched ahead, and did not strike again. The men were nearly knee-deep as they baled the water out and one was afterwards idle because his oar had gone. In spite of this, they made the creek and drifted quietly into the gloom of the mangroves with the flowing tide.

After a time, the water got shallow and they pushed her across the mud while leaves and rotting branches floated up the creek. No light pierced the forest, and the feeble beam of Kit's lantern scarcely touched the shadowy trunks that moved past until they came to an opening. Kit thought this was the spot he had been told about and turned the boat. She would not float to the bank and he and his four men got out and lifted the coffin. They sank in treacherous mud, but reached a belt of sand riddled by land-crab's holes. All was very quiet except for the ripple of the tide and the noise made by the scuttling crabs. The sand, however, was dry and warm and they sat down to wait for morning, when the boat went away.

CHAPTER X

THE ROAD TO THE MISSION

THE sun was high when Kit and his tired men reached the village. He was wet with sweat and the moisture that had dripped upon him from the leaves in the early

morning, and the men gasped when they put down their load. Two wore greasy engine-room overalls, and two ragged suits of duck; their soft hats were stained and battered and they looked like ruffians. Although Mayne paid good wages, respectable seamen avoided the *Rio Negro*, and her crew were, as a rule, more accustomed to fight with knives and sandbags on disorderly water-fronts. Now they carried pistols, hidden as far as possible, but ready for use.

Small, square mud houses occupied the hole in the forest. Where the plaster had not fallen off, their white fronts were dazzling, but they were dirty and ruinous and the narrow street was strewn with decaying rubbish. Although the *pueblo* had once prospered under Spanish rule, it was now inhabited by languid half-breeds of strangely mixed blood, engaged in smuggling and revolutionary plots. They stood about the doorways, barefooted and ragged, watching Kit with furtive black eyes.

"I want porters and a guide to the mission," he told the the *patron*, who lounged against a wall smoking a cigar.

"It is a long way, señor, and the road is bad. Besides, one cannot travel when the sun is high."

"The road is, no doubt, safer then than in the dark."

"That is true," agreed the other with a philosophic shrug. "The country is disturbed."

"I must start at once," Kit said firmly. "I am willing to pay for the risk."

The *patron* spoke to the others in a harsh dialect, but none of the loafing figures moved.

"They say the risk is great," he remarked. "There has been fighting and the president's soldiers are in the woods."

"The president's soldiers will not meddle with us," Kit answered incautiously.

For a moment the half-breed's eyes were keen but his dark face resumed its inscrutable look.

"Then the señor is a friend of the president's?"

"If we meet his soldiers, they will let me pass."

"The soldiers are not the worst. There are the *rurales*; men without shame, who shoot and ask no questions. However, I will see if I can find porters, if the señor will wait until the afternoon."

Kit distrusted the fellow and thought he had an object for putting off the start. He had been warned that the *Meztisos* sympathised with the rebels, and imagined that his party's safety depended on its speed. But he did not want to look impatient, and, imitating the other's carelessness, sat down and lighted a cigarette while he pondered. To begin with, he suspected that the *patron* would prevent his meeting any of the president's soldiers who might be about, and it would be prudent to finish his business and get back to the ship before Galdar knew he was in the woods. His men claimed to be American citizens, and Mayne knew where he had gone, but the latter's statements might be doubted if the party disappeared. It was known that Askew was engaged in a risky trade and the captain's story would look more romantic than plausible.

Kit saw he must depend upon his own resources, and presently noted that a man was leaving the village. The fellow kept behind the group in the street as far as he could and moved quickly. There was something stealthy about his movements, and when he looked back, as if to see if Kit were watching, the latter got up.

"Stop that man," he said.

"But he is going to his work, señor," the *patron* objected.

"In this country, one does not work while the sun is high," said Kit, who rather ostentatiously pulled out his pistol. "Call him back!"

The *patron* shouted and the man returned, but Kit kept his pistol in his hand.

"Nobody must leave the *pueblo* until I start," he said. "I want porters and am willing to pay."

"Very well," the *patron* agreed shrugging. "Perhaps I can find a few men, but they will want the money before they go."

For a time, Kit bargained. The sailors were tired, and few white men are capable of much exertion in the tropic swamps. He must have help, and doubting if the *Meztisos* could be trusted, thought it best to offer a sum that would excite their greed, but stipulated that half would not be paid until they returned. When the *patron* was satisfied Kit turned to the sailors.

"You'll have to hustle, boys," he said. "The sooner we make the mission, the sooner we'll get back, and I reckon nobody wants to stop in these swamps. There's something beside your wages coming to you."

"That's all right, boss," one replied. "The old man drove hard, but he paid well and he was white. You can go ahead; we'll put the job over."

The peons took up the stretcher-poles lashed to the coffin, a relief party went behind and they set off. Nobody spoke and the *Meztisos'* bare feet fell silently on the hot sand, although Kit heard the dragging tramp of the sailors' muddy boots. In the open space round the village, the sun burned their skin and they pushed on as fast as possible for the twilight of the woods.

When the light was fading, the porters declared the swamps in front were dangerous and put down their load, and after some trouble the white men lighted a fire. A heavy dew began to drip from the leaves and the blaze was comforting in the gloom that swiftly settled down. Kit had brought a piece of tarpaulin and spread it between the roots of a cottonwood. He did not mean to go to sleep, but his head ached and he was worn out by physical effort and anxious watching. By and by his eyes got heavy and he sank down in a corner of the great roots.

The fire had burned low when he looked up and a bright beam that touched a neighbouring trunk indicated that the moon was high. All was very quiet but for the splash of the falling dew; the glade was a little brighter, and rousing himself with an effort, he glanced about. He saw the white men's figures, stretched in ungainly attitudes on a piece of old canvas. They were all there, but he could not see the *Meztisos*. Getting up, he walked into the gloom and then stopped with something of a shock. There was nobody about.

For a few moments Kit thought hard. To begin with, he had been rash to pay half the porters' wages before they set out. The money was a large sum for them and they had stolen away; perhaps because they were satisfied and afraid of meeting the president's soldiers, or perhaps to betray the party to the rebels for another reward. If the

latter supposition were correct, Kit thought he ran some risk. Galdar's friends knew he could not be bribed and that Adam was ill, although it was hardly possible they knew he was dead. They would see that Kit had now control and, since his help was valuable to the president, might try to kill him. His best plan was to push on.

He wakened the sailors, who grumbled, but picked up the coffin when he tersely explained the situation. Wet bushes brushed against them, soaking their thin clothes, trailers caught their heads, and the road got wetter and rougher until they came to a creek. Kit could not tell how deep it was; the forest was very dark and only a faint reflection marked the water.

"We must get across, boys," he said and the others agreed. They were hard men, but the dark and silence weighed them down and excited vague superstitious fears. It was a gruesome business in which they were engaged, and they did not like their load.

They plunged in and one called out hoarsely when he stumbled and the lurching coffin struck his head. Another gasped, as if he were choking, while he struggled to balance the poles. The current rippled round their legs; it was hard to pull their feet out of the mud, and when there was a splash in the dark they stopped, dripping with sweat that was not altogether caused by effort. One swore at the others in a breathless voice.

"Shove on, you slobs!" he said. "The old man's getting heavier while you stop. I want to dump him and be done with the job. Guess I've had enough."

Splashing and tumbling, they went forward and when they struggled up the bank Kit wiped his wet face. For a moment or two he had thought the men would drop their load, and as it jolted, vague and black, on their shoulders, the creaking of the poles had jarred his nerves. He was going to keep his promise, but he sympathised with the man who had had enough.

At length, when the men were exhausted, the trees got thinner and the moonlight shining through touched the front of a ruined building. The rest was indistinct, but the building was large and had evidently belonged to a

sugar or coffee planter. The sailors stopped and Kit studied a gap in the wall.

The gap did not look inviting and there were, no doubt, snakes and poisonous spiders inside, but he could go no farther and the broken walls offered some protection. Perhaps Kit was moved by an atavistic fear of the dark forest and he owned that he was influenced by the civilised man's longing for the shelter of a house. They went in, and after putting down the coffin in a room where vines crawled about the ruined wall, the sailors entered the next. One frankly stated that they wanted to get away from the coffin; Kit could stop and watch it if he liked, but it bothered them to have the thing about.

Kit let them go, and sitting down in a corner among the rubbish lighted a cigar. The silence was burdensome, although a small creature began to rustle in the wall. Kit did not know if it was a snake or a spider, and was too tired to feel disturbed. By and by his cigar fell from his mouth. He picked it up, but it fell again and his head drooped.

The moonbeam had moved some distance when he opened his eyes and straightened his body with a jerk. The room was nearly dark, and when he thought about it afterwards he imagined he was only half awake, for his heart beat and he was conscious of an enervating fear. A dark object, indistinct but like a man, stood beside the coffin.

With something of an effort, Kit recovered his self-control as the figure turned and came towards him. It moved with a curious stealthy gait, making no noise and this was enough for Kit. He had no ground for distrusting the sailors, and they wore heavy boots. Trying not to change his position, he felt for his automatic pistol. The butt caught a fold of his sash and he was forced to bend his elbow in order to get it out. It looked as if he would be too late, and he slipped as the movement dislodged the rubbish on which he sat. Then, as he shrank with an instinctive quiver from the prick of the knife, the figure swerved and leaped back.

Kit threw up the pistol and pulled the trigger. There was a flash that dazzled his eyes, but when he leaned forward his antagonist had gone. He heard no movement when

he sprang to his feet and almost imagined he had been dreaming, until the sailors shouted and their boots rattled on the broken floor. They ran in and when Kit told them what had happened, went to the hole in the wall.

The moonlight touched the front of the building and part of the road was bright, but the shadow of the forest had crept across the rest. All was very quiet ; there was no sound in the gloom. Then a flake of plaster fell close behind Kit's head and a sharp report rolled across the trees. One of the men shot at a venture and two of his companions ran savagely along the road, until Kit called them back.

" Come in," he said when they returned. " You're a plain mark in the moonlight and can't see the other fellow among the trees."

" Looks as if it was you he wanted," one replied. " Well, I guess we have no use for being left without a boss, and since we don't like your camping ground, you have got to come with us. We'll draw cuts for who's to watch."

CHAPTER XI

KIT KEEPS HIS PROMISE

IT was getting light when the man on watch called Kit, who went to the gap in the wall. Thin mist drifted about the trees and trailed across the road. There was some open ground in front of the building, but behind this the forest loomed in a blurred, shadowy mass.

" I reckon I saw something move where the fog's on the road," the man remarked.

Kit saw nothing. His eyes were keen, for he had searched the hillsides for sheep, but it looked as if they were not as keen as the sailor's, and standing in the shadow he watched the indicated spot. After a minute or two, a figure came out of the fog and signalled with a lifted hand.

" More of them around ! " said the sailor grimly. " There's

trouble coming to them if they mean to corral us. Jake's at the side window, and he had to get out of Mobile because he was too handy with his gun. Not often had to pull mine, but I can shoot some."

"Quit talking!" Kit rejoined, and his mouth set firm when the figure vanished.

He thought the rebels meant to surround the building. If so, they were probably numerous, and the rifle shot some hours before justified the supposition. They had first tried to kill him quietly and, finding this impossible, had resolved to seize the party. Well, there was good cover behind the broken walls, his men were a reckless lot, and he meant to fight. He wished the others would begin, for standing highly-strung, in the dew was nervous work.

The light had got clearer when he noted a movement in a festoon of trailing vines. The wet leaves shook as if somebody were cautiously pulling them back, and Kit stiffened his muscles. It was a comfort to feel his hand was steady, and although he had not used a pistol much he was a good shot with a gun. He thought he could send a bullet through the moving leaves, but wanted his lurking enemy to begin the fight.

A face appeared at an opening and an arm pushed through. The man was coming out and Kit felt his nerves tingle. Then, as the fellow's body followed his arm, the sailor said quietly, "Don't move, boss. I'll fix him."

Next moment Kit swung round, for the man who stepped out into the road wore white uniform. The sailor leaned against the wall to steady his aim, and his tense pose and rigid hand indicated that he was pressing the trigger.

"Hold on!" Kit shouted. "Don't shoot!"

The sailor lowered his pistol and Kit, springing out of the shadow, waved his hat.

"Come forward. We are friends."

The *rural* turned and called to somebody, and then joining Kit glanced at the sailor's pistol with a smile.

"It looks as if I had run some risk. You did not mean to be surprised."

"No," said Kit; "one takes precautions. I came very near being surprised last night."

"So the *Galdareros* are about? We suspected something like this."

"I suppose it was why you meant to search the *hacienda*. But did you see us?"

The *rural* indicated a plume of smoke that spun up from behind the ruined wall.

"We saw *that*. When one takes precautions, it is prudent to see they are complete."

Kit nodded. There was no use in getting angry; his men were rash and careless, but, to some extent, this was why he had chosen them. They had, no doubt, lighted the fire to cook breakfast.

"Where is your companion?" he asked.

"There are three of us; you will see the others in a few moments. They watch the road farther on. It is usual for us to patrol in twos, but of late some have not returned. A revolution is a bad time for *rurales*; one pays old reckonings then."

Kit smiled. "I imagine it would have been bad for any *Galdarero* who had tried to steal away down the road. But I expect you know me?"

"We have orders about you, señor; you see a servant of yours," the *rural* answered with a bow. "But it might be better if you told us your plans."

After giving him a cigarette, Kit sent the sailor to tell the others, and when the *rurales* came up offered them a share of the breakfast his men had cooked. While they ate he told them what had brought him there and where he was going.

"So the American is dead? I have seen him at the presidio," one remarked. "Well, señor, it would be prudent to finish your business at Salinas to-night. After that, I do not know. There has been fighting and some of the president's soldiers have been killed in the swamps."

"I must finish the business," Kit replied. "It does not matter what happens afterwards."

The *rural* nodded. "The American talked like that. Quick and short, but what he said he went. However, we will go to Salinas with you when you are ready."

Kit got up and gave his men an order. "I am ready now."

They set off soon afterwards and reached the mission as the light was fading. Two small mud buildings and a little church stood among some ruins in an opening, and a frail old man met the party at the gate. He took off his hat when the sailors put down the coffin, and then listened to Kit's quiet narrative.

"This poor place is yours; it was a prosperous mission long since," he said. "In this country, men no longer build, but plot and destroy—it is easier than the other. Now we will put the coffin in the church and then I will give you food."

Father Herman drew back an old leather curtain and the smell of incense met Kit as he stood at the door while the sailors went forward with their load. The church was nearly dark, but Kit saw it had some beauty and there were objects in it that hinted at more prosperous days. At the other end, a ruby lamp glimmered and a wax candle burned with clear flame before a statue of the Virgin. Kit knew whence the candle came and that Hattie Askew had knelt on the stones beneath it, praying that her husband might get well. Then he looked at Father Herman, with a doubt in his mind.

The other met his glance and smiled. "The greatest of these is charity," he said in Latin, and resumed in fine Castillian: "He was our benefactor, a man who kept his word, and with such a wife I think our faith was his. It is a gracious sentiment that they should not be parted."

"In a sense," Kit said quietly, "I think they have not been parted yet. At the last he said, with confidence, he was going to meet his wife."

"Who knows?" said Father Herman. "There is much that is dark; but one felt that his spirit reached out after hers. Well, I knew he would come back; I have long expected him."

He went forward and lighted more candles when the sailors put down the coffin, and the noise their boots made jarred Kit's nerves as they came back. The light spread,

touching the bare walls and tawdry decorations about the shrines. It was a poor little church, falling into ruin, and the beauty its pious builders had given it was vanishing. Yet something redeemed it from being commonplace, and Kit felt a strange emotional stirring as his eyes rested on the dim ruby lamp and the rude black coffin. He thought the light of love could not be quenched, and knew the tender romance that had burned in the heart of the old Buccaneer. It was with something of an effort he turned away, and followed Father Herman across the corral.

Two hours later, red torches flared in the dark as they laid Adam in his grave, and Kit, worn by anxiety and physical strain, listened dully to the solemn Latin office. Then when the old priest's voice died away, he went back to the mission, where he fell asleep and slept twelve hours.

In the morning, he sat beneath a broken arch that had once formed part of a cloister. Presently Father Herman came up to him and sat down opposite. Although he looked feeble, his glance was clear and kind.

"This house is yours, señor, and I am your servant," he said. "Yet I cannot hope that you will stop long, and the times are disturbed. If I can help——"

"Since the rebels know I am here, it would not be safe to stop, but I cannot reach Salinas Point before the steamer sails," Kit replied. "I must get to Havana as soon as possible."

Father Herman thought for a few minutes and resumed: "A small schooner is loading at a beach not far off and I know the *patron*. He would take you to Arenas, where the president has supporters and you might get a ship. I think he sails to-night, but I will send a message."

Kit thanked him and went on: "You were my uncle's friend, and now I have taken his place you are mine. As you let him send you things the mission needed, perhaps you will not refuse me."

"I had not hoped for this," Father Herman answered with a grateful look. "The generous gifts meant much to us, for we are very poor."

"Friendship has privileges. Besides, it was my uncle's wish, and will be something I can do for his sake."

Father Herman's worn face got very soft and he gave Kit an approving glance. "You are his kinsman, señor; one cannot doubt that. Like him, you are staunch and do not forget, but in some ways you are different. I will take your gifts and pray that yours may be a less stormy life."

"Thank you," Kit said gently and went off to look after his men.

In the afternoon he left the mission, and a week later reached Havana, where he found a cablegram waiting. He got a shock when he opened it, and stood for a time with the message crumpled in his hand, for it told him that Peter Askew was dying at Ashness. Then he sat down on the long, arcaded veranda of the hotel, with a poignant sense of loss, for the last blow was heavier than the first. It would be too late when he got home; Andrew, his English relative, would not have sent the message had there been any hope.

After a time, Kit began to pull himself together. He felt dull and half stunned, but saw that he must brace up. Although one duty was denied him, another was left. He could not bid his father good-bye, but he could keep his promise to Adam, and there was much to be done. Getting up with a resolute movement, he went to the telegraph office.

Although Peter had not hinted that he was ill, Kit felt he ought to have gone home before, and now blamed Alvarez for keeping him. He knew this was not logical, but he hated the country, with its turmoils and plots. It was not worth helping, and in very truth he did not know if by supporting the president he were helping it or not. After all, however, this was not important; Alvarez needed a last supply of munitions that Adam had agreed to send. Kit doubted if they would be paid for, but the doubt did not count for much. Adam knew the risk when he agreed and his engagements bound his nephew. The goods must be delivered and then Kit would let the business go.

When he reached the office he wrote a cablegram to Andrew at Ashness and another to Mayne, who had left Havana before Kit arrived.

CHAPTER XII

THE LAST CARGO

DUSK was falling and Kit urged his tired mule up the winding road. His skin was grimed with dust, for he had ridden hard in scorching heat, and was anxious and impatient to get on. The *Rio Negro* was in the lagoon and some cargo had been landed, but Kit stopped the work when nobody came to take the goods. It looked as if the message he had sent through a secret channel had not reached the president, and this was ominous.

He had heard rumours of fighting when he was in Cuba and the United States, but the newspapers gave him little information and he had driven the *Rio Negro* across at full speed in order to finish the contract before the revolution spread, which was all he wanted. Adam's staunch loyalty had cost him his life, but the president had no claim on Kit. Besides, his stopping in the country had kept him away from Ashness when he was needed there. He smiled as he admitted that he was hardly logical, since he was stubbornly pushing on when almost exhausted in order that Alvarez might get the goods he required ; but after all, this was for Adam's sake.

As he rode up the hill the sky got brighter and a flickering illumination was reflected on the clouds that hung about the mountains.

For a time he skirted a belt of trees, and when he came out on the open hillside the illumination was ominously bright. Now he was getting nearer, the clouds looked different from the mist that rolled down the mountains in the evening ; they were dark and trailed away from the range. Still, he could go no faster, and he waited with

growing anxiety until he reached a narrow tableland. It commanded a wider view, and he raised himself in the stirrups as he saw that the light was the reflection of a large fire.

He sank back and pulling up the mule let the bridle fall on its drooping neck. It looked as if a number of houses were burning in the town, which indicated that there had been a fight. The trouble was, he did not know who had won, and this was important. If the president were badly beaten, he would not need the supplies at the lagoon, although they might be useful to the rebels. Kit imagined it would be prudent to turn back, but he must find out what had happened, and sent the mule forward.

Half an hour afterwards he rode into the town. The small square houses were dark and there was nobody in the narrow street, but he heard a confused uproar farther on. Although the glare in the sky was fainter, it leaped up now and then and a cloud of smoke floated across the roofs. A red glow shone down the next street and he saw the pavement was torn up. Broken furniture lay among piles of stones, the walls were chipped, and when Kit got down he had some trouble to lead the mule across the ruined barricade. Although he saw nobody yet, the shouts that came from the neighbourhood of the presidio were ominous.

Kit remounted and rode up slowly to the edge of the sandy square where the palms grew along the rails. The square was occupied by an excited crowd, but the presidio had gone. A great pile of smoking rubbish and a wall, broken by wide cracks, marked where it had stood. Flames played about the ruin, and Kit turned his mule. He thought the crowd was waiting to search for plunder, and did not expect to find anybody calm enough to answer his questions. Besides, he needed food and drink and might learn what had happened at the café.

The small tables stretched across the street and were all occupied, but when Kit had tied the mule to the alameda railings opposite he found a chair and ordered an omelette and wine. The waiter looked at him with some surprise and Kit wondered whether it was prudent of him to stop. "You have been burning the presidio," he remarked.

"We have got rid of a tyrant," the waiter replied.

"You may get another worse," said Kit, as coolly as he could. "What happened to the president?"

Somebody shouted "*Mozo*," and when the waiter went away Kit rested his arms on the table. He was very tired, and it was obvious that he had come too late. Since the president was overthrown, he had lost a large sum of money and wasted the efforts he had made to carry out Adam's engagements. He must get back to the lagoon as soon as possible, but he needed food and wanted to find out if Alvarez had escaped. There was, however, some risk in asking questions, because the café seemed to be occupied by triumphant rebels.

Presently the men at the next table got up and their place was taken by another group, among which Kit noted Francisca Sarmiento and her relations. He thought they looked surprised, but they saluted him politely, and soon afterwards the girl, who was nearest, looked round.

"You have courage, señor," she remarked in a meaning tone.

"I do not know if courage is needed," Kit replied, forcing a smile. "It looks as if I could no longer meddle with politics."

"Then, since you could not help Alvarez, why did you come?"

"I imagined I could help him, until I saw the presidio was burnt," Kit replied. "In fact, I haven't found out what has happened yet."

The girl studied him with some curiosity, but Kit felt that he had nothing to fear from her.

"If one did not know that you were incorruptible, one could understand your rashness," she said, in a mocking tone. "I suppose your steamer is in the lagoon?"

Kit looked round. The café was crowded, but the people were talking excitedly, nobody seemed to notice him and the girl. The noise would prevent their talk being heard.

"There is no use in denying it, because Galdar's spies have, no doubt, seen her. I would be glad if you can tell me what has become of the president."

Francisca gave him a keen glance. "You do not know Alvarez is dead?"

"Ah!" said Kit. "I did not know. Was he killed?"

"He died soon after the fighting began. The doctors say it was apoplexy; he had been hurrying about in the burning sun."

"I wonder——. He was a strong man and used to the sun."

Francisca smiled. "One does not ask questions, señor, at a time like this. It is prudent to believe what one is told. When the soldiers lost their leader they ran away.

Kit was silent for a few minutes. He had had a faint hope that the president might rally his supporters and begin the fight again, but the hope was gone. He knew all he wanted, and must leave the town as soon as he had had some food.

"Alvarez was a friend of mine, and the news you have given me is something of a shock," he said. "I think the country will feel its loss, but that is not my business, and since there is nothing to keep me here, I shall be glad to get away."

"It would be prudent to go soon," Francisca remarked in a low voice.

"I do not see why. I am no longer important enough for your friends to meddle with me."

"You are very modest, if you are not rather dull. You have goods that would be useful to the new president, who has a rival he did not expect. Don Feliz Muñez has turned traitor, and there are people who support him in the coast province."

"Another president!" Kit exclaimed with a soft laugh, and then bowed to the girl. "I think you mean well. You have given me a useful hint and you have my thanks. I will be rash and tell you that Galdar shall not have the goods I brought."

Francisca's eyes got soft and a touch of colour crept into her olive skin.

"One does not often meet a man who puts honour before money. *Adios, señor*! I wish you well."

Then she turned to her companions, who presently left

the table, and soon afterwards Kit's omelette was brought. While he ate, Olsen came in and, sitting down opposite, lighted a cigarette.

"You'll allow that the Buccaneer backed the wrong man," he said. "I warned you and reckon your obstinacy has cost you something."

"That is so," Kit agreed. "One must run risks in a business like this, but I don't expect you to sympathise."

Olsen smiled. "I don't pretend I'm not satisfied, but I can show you how to get some of your money back. I've learned much about you and Askew since we had our last talk, and am willing to buy part of the *Rio Negro's* cargo."

"You seem to know she has arrived."

"Oh, yes! I knew some hours since. I've been looking out for you."

"To whom do you mean to sell the goods?" Kit asked.

"Does that matter?"

"Yes; it's rather important."

"The important thing is, you'll get paid," Olsen rejoined.

Kit frowned. He imagined he could demand a high price, and now Alvarez was dead, there was perhaps no reason for refusing to bargain; but he did not mean to let Galdar have the goods. He thought Adam would not have done so, and he held the new president, to some extent, accountable for Adam's last illness.

"The cargo is not for sale," he said.

Olsen looked hard at him and saw he was resolute. "Oh, well, if you're determined, there's no use in arguing! You're something of a curiosity; I haven't met a man like you before."

He went away and Kit ordered more wine, for he was thirsty after his long ride and had borne some strain. He had to wait for the wine, but had expected this since the café was crowded, and in the meantime he got up and looked across the street. Nobody had meddled with the mule, which stood quietly by the railings with drooping head. Kit wondered where he could get it some food and if he could hire a fresh animal.

Then a waiter brought the wine, and when he had drunk some and lighted a cigarette Kit, listening to the talk

of the men at the next table, got a hint that threw some light on Olsen's offer. Alvarez had used the vaults under the presidio for a munition store, and when he was dead the mayor-domo had blown up the building as the rebels forced their way in. Now there was a new president in the field, it was obvious why Galdar wanted fresh supplies. This, however, was not important, and Kit drained his glass and then tried to rouse himself. He must look after the mule, and if it was not fit for the journey, get another animal.

He felt strangely reluctant to move ; the fatigue he had for a time shaken off returned with puzzling suddenness and threatened to overpower him. His head was very heavy, he could hardly hear the people talk, and every now and then his eyes shut. He could not keep them open, but after a few minutes he straightened his bent shoulders with a jerk and clenched his fist. It was not fatigue that was mastering him ; the wine was drugged. He had not noted a suspicious taste, but he was thirsty and the omelette was strongly flavoured with garlic and red pepper.

Holding himself stiffly upright, he tried to think. Olsen had, no doubt, ordered the wine to be drugged, and his object was plain. He meant to prevent Kit reaching the lagoon until he had removed the cargo on the beach and tried to persuade Mayne to land the rest. Well, the plot would fail, and with an effort Kit got up and crossed the street. He suspected that he was watched, but nobody tried to stop him and he mounted the mule.

The animal moved off at a better pace than he had hoped and he tried to brace himself. His head ached and his brain was very dull, but somehow he stuck to the saddle, and although he could hardly guide the mule the animal avoided the people in its way. After a time, the street got empty, the noise behind was fainter, and the houses were dark. Nobody seemed to follow him and Kit began to hope he might be able to leave the town. He did not know what he would do then, and hardly imagined he could keep up the effort much longer. Perhaps, when he got away from the houses, he could tie up the mule in a quiet place and rest.

When he rode down a rough track into open country he rocked in the saddle and would have fallen but for the high peak and big stirrups. The hillside was blurred; distorted objects that he thought were rocks and cactus lurched about in the elusive moonlight, and the sweat ran down his face as he fought against the drug. He knew it would conquer him, but he was going on as long as possible.

At length the mule stepped into a hole, Kit's foot came out of the stirrup and he fell. For a moment or two the mule dragged him along; then he got his other foot loose and for a time knew nothing more.

The moonlight was fading when he opened his eyes and saw that he was lying beside a clump of cactus. Indistinct objects moved along the road not far off and he heard the click of hoofs on stones. A mule train was passing and was, no doubt, going to the lagoon. He could not get up and was glad he was in dark shadow. The muleteers had probably been told to look out for him and a blow from a heavy stone would prevent his interfering with the rebels' plans. The indistinct figures, however, went on and Kit relapsed into unconsciousness.

It was daylight when he wakened and saw a man bending over him. Kit was cold and wet with dew; his head ached horribly and he did not try to get up. His pistol was underneath him and if the fellow meant to kill him he could not resist.

"What do you want?" he asked.

The man said he had seen him lying there and imagined he was ill. Then he held out his hand and asked if Kit could get up. Kit was surprised when he found himself on his feet, although he swayed as he tried to keep his balance.

"I suppose you are a liberator?" he said dully.

The other clenched his dark fist. "No, señor! Those dogs, the *Galdareros*, are no friends of mine! But you were for the president; it was known in the town."

Kit admitted it. The fellow's scornful denial was comforting, and after some talk, walking with a painful effort, he went with him down the hill to a small mud house. A few minutes after he got there he went to sleep, but in the

meantime the man had promised to help him reach the lagoon.

He kept his promise, and before it was light next morning Kit dismounted on the sandy beach. There was no moon and mist drifted about the trees, but the water shone faintly and the tide was nearly full. The steamer loomed in the gloom and when Kit shouted there was a rattle of pulley blocks and a splash of oars. Ten minutes afterwards Mayne met him at the gangway and gave him his hand.

"It's some relief to see you back," he said. "Finlay has his fires banked and can get steam to take us out in an hour or two."

Kit went with him to his room and sat down limply. He was covered with dust and wet with dew; his face was haggard and his eyes were dull.

"I'll tell you about my adventures later," he said. "What about the cargo?"

"Some dagos came along with a mule train and loaded up part of the truck on the beach. They had an order that looked as if it had been signed by you, and as they were a pretty tough crowd and had their knives loose, I let them take the goods. When I studied the order I wasn't sure about the hand and brought off all they had left. By and by another gang came along, but I refused to send a boat until I'd seen you."

"You were prudent," Kit remarked. "The order was forged. Let me see the mate's cargo-lists."

He studied the book Mayne gave him and then pondered. Olsen had, no doubt, forged the order and Kit imagined he would have some trouble to get payment for the goods. The manufacturers might be persuaded to take back the rest of the cargo at something less than its proper price, but Kit thought the value of the munitions supplied to Alvarez would be lost. The new president would certainly try to disown the debt. Kit, however, had known that Adam's staunchness might cost him much, and something might, perhaps, be saved. He had had enough of the country, and as soon as he could straighten out the tangle in which the revolution had involved Adam's business he was going back to Ashness.

"Heave your anchor when you're ready," he said to Mayne. "We'll call at Havana and then steam for New Orleans."

At high-water he stood on the bridge, watching the mangroves fade into the mist. Ahead, the sun was rising out of a smooth sea, the air was fresh, and Kit's heart was lighter. He had done with plots and intrigue and was going back to Ashness and the quiet hills. At the same time, he felt a tender melancholy as he thought about the little church at Salinas and the marble cross in the sandy yard. Then he lifted his head and the melancholy vanished as he looked across the sparkling water.

PART III.—KIT'S RETURN

CHAPTER I

KIT'S WELCOME

KIT was comfortably tired when he sat down by the beck at the head of the dale. He had been at Ashness for a week, and finding much to be done had occupied himself with characteristic energy. It was a relief to feel that the heat of the tropics had not relaxed his muscles as much as he thought, and that the languidness he had sometimes fought against was vanishing before the bracing winds that swept his native hills. The ache in his arms had come from using the draining spade and his knees were stiff after a long walk through the heather to examine the Herdwick sheep. His vigour was coming back and he was conscious of a keen but tranquil satisfaction with the quiet dale.

He found the quiet soothing. He had had enough excitement and adventure, and had half-consciously recognised that the life he had led in the tropics was not for him. On the whole he thought he had made good. One did one's best at the work one found, but intrigue was not his proper job. For all that, he did not mean to philosophise, and had something to think about.

When he sold the *Rio Negro*, and paid his debts, he found a larger surplus than he had hoped. Moreover, his agents had not yet enforced all business claims and might be able to send him a fresh sum. The money he brought home would not have made him a rich man in America, but it would go a long way in the dale, and the soil and flocks at Ashness could be improved by modern methods and care-

fully spent capital. Kit had begun at once and found his task engrossing, but when the day's work was over he felt a gentle melancholy and a sense of loneliness. Adam and Peter had gone and he had loved them both ; he knew he would not meet their like again. Yet he had not lost them altogether. They had, so to speak, blazed the trail for him, and he must try to follow, fronting obstacles with their fearless calm.

Then he took his pipe from his mouth and his heart beat as a figure came round a bend of the road. The girl was some distance off and he could not see her face, but he knew her and braced himself. He had known the meeting must come and much depended on her attitude. Grace was no longer a romantic girl, and though he had not forgotten her, she might have been persuaded that she had nothing to do with him. Now she must choose her line, and he sat still, half prepared for her to pass him with a bow. While he waited, his dog got up and ran along the road. Old Bob knew Grace, and it looked as if she had spoken to, and perhaps petted, him while his master was away.

She stoppod, and Kit felt ashamed when he got up, for she gave him her hand with a friendly look, and he saw she had not changed as much as he had thought. The proud calm he approved was perhaps more marked, but he imagined the generous rashness he had liked as well still lurked beneath the surface. He had met attractive girls in the tropics who knew they were beautiful and added by art to their physical charm. Grace, however, used hers unconsciously ; he thought she was too proud to care if she had such charm or not.

" I am glad to see you back," she said and stroked the dog that leaped upon her. " Bob and I are friends. He knew me when I came round the corner."

" So did I," Kit rejoined quietly.

He thought he noted a touch of colour in her face, but she smiled.

" You did not get up. Perhaps you were not sure, like Bob ? "

" I think I was sure. But I have been away some time and it was not my part to force you to acknowledge me."

"If I didn't want to?" Grace suggested. "Well, I do not forget my friends, and now, if you are satisfied, we can let that go." She paused and resumed when he went on with her: "The dalesfolk have missed you, particularly since your father died. It must have been a shock—I felt it, too, because I saw him now and then. We were friends in spite of all."

Kit was grateful for her frank sympathy, and felt he could talk to her about his father.

"He did not tell me this, but he liked you."

"He was just," Grace replied. "People knew, and trusted him. He had none of the rancour that often leads us wrong. When he was firm he did not get angry. That kind of attitude is hard, but it makes things easier. But you were in America with his brother, were you not?"

"I was in the United States, and afterwards in some of the countries on the Caribbean."

"Ah," said Grace with curiosity, "that must have been interesting! One understands that it is a beautiful and romantic coast, with its memories of the great Elizabethan sailors and the pirates."

"It is romantic, and dangerous in parts. You can land at some of the towns from modern mail-boats and find smart shops and cafés; others have fallen into ruin and lie, half-hidden by the forest, beside malaria-haunted lagoons. You steal in through the mist at the top of a high tide, much as the old pirates did, and when you land, find hints of a vanished civilisation and the Spaniards' broken power. But you seem to know something about the coast."

Grace smiled. "You look surprised! There is a library at Tarnside, although it is not often used, and we have books about the voyages of the buccaneers. One book is rather fascinating. But what were you doing in the lagoons?"

"Sometimes we loaded dyewoods and rubber; sometimes we lent money to ambitious politicians in return for unlawful trading privileges, and now and then engaged in business that was something like that of the old adventurers."

"After that you must find the dale very tame," Grace remarked, and quietly studied Kit. "It is hard to imagine you a pirate. You don't look the part, and, no doubt, like other occupations, it requires some study."

Kit laughed. "One does the best one can! I rather think taking trouble and a determination to make good are as useful as specialised training."

"Perhaps that's true. It's curious, in a way, but I expect a good farmer, for example, might make a successful buccaneer. One understands, though, that the last was hanged a hundred years since."

"There are a few left, although their methods have changed with the times. Some day I would like to tell you about my uncle. He was, so to speak, a survival, and I think you would appreciate him. But how have things been going in the dale?"

Grace's twinkle vanished, her look got serious, and Kit thought he noted signs of strain. After all, she had changed since he left Ashness. It was not that she looked older, although she was now a rather stately woman and not an impulsive girl; he felt that she had known care.

"On the whole," she said, "things have not gone very well. We have had wet summers and heavy snow in spring. The flocks are poor and rents have come down. Bell has gone; he quarrelled with Hayes about some new machinery for the mill. All is much the same at Tarnside, though my father is not so active. Gerald left Woolwich—perhaps you knew—and is in a London bank."

Kit hid his surprise. Gerald was not the stuff of which good bank clerks are made, although Osborn's influence with the local manager had, no doubt, got him the post. Kit imagined the lad had been forced to leave Woolwich, but money must be scarce at Tarnside, since he had gone into business. This threw some light on the hint of weariness he had noted about Grace. If fresh economy was needful, she and Mrs. Osborn must carry the load.

"Hayes is still your agent. I met him yesterday and he gave me a sour nod," Kit remarked.

"Yes," said Grace, and the added quietly: "I sometimes wish he were not!"

"Well, I never liked the man. All the same, he's a very good agent, from the landlord's point of view, and your father's interests ought to be safe with him."

"I suppose so," Grace agreed, but her look was doubtful, and they reached the Ashness lonning a few minutes later. When Kit stopped she gave him her hand. "I hear you are going to make a number of improvements, and wish you good luck!"

Kit went up the lonning and sitting down in the porch lighted his pipe.

He had noted a hint of anxiety, and Grace had implied that things were not going well for the Osborns. He meant to marry Grace; his longing for her was keener than he had felt it yet, but it was not altogether selfish. She must be removed from surroundings in which she could not thrive. Tarnside, with its rash extravagance, pretence, and stern private economy, was not the place for her. But he felt he must be patient and cautious; there were numerous obstacles in his way.

In the meantime, Grace met Thorn farther along the road and tried to hide her annoyance as he advanced. Perhaps it was the contrast between him and Kit, whose thin, brown face had a half-ascetic look, for Alan was fat and getting coarse. Grace had noted this before, but not so plainly as she did now. His manners were urbane and he belonged to her circle; to some extent, his code was hers and she had his prejudices and tastes.

"Was that Askew?" he inquired when he turned and went on with her.

Grace said it was and he gave her a careless look.

"I heard he had come back. Might have been better if he had stopped away. A fellow like that is rather disturbing."

"I don't think he could do much harm, when you and Hayes are on your guard," Grace rejoined.

"That is so," Thorn agreed, and she could not tell if he knew she had meant to be ironical. "Anyhow, I don't

suppose he wants to do much harm ; I was thinking about his example."

"Is it a dangerous example to improve one's land ? I thought you advocated scientific farming ? "

"So I do. I don't mean that, although I don't know if Askew's farming is scientific or not. One can't judge yet. His independence and habit of taking his own line might be dangerous."

"Mr. Askew's independence is justified. Ashness is his."

"Yes," said Thorn thoughtfully, "that's the trouble. If he was a farming tenant, things would be easier."

Grace laughed. "You are delightfully naïve ! I'm afraid you'll have to leave Mr. Askew alone, but I don't expect he'll do anything alarming. I think you know he is a friend of mine."

"I knew he was, before he went abroad. If you have renewed the friendship, it means you're satisfied about him and perhaps we needn't be disturbed. Your judgment is generally sound."

"Thank you," said Grace. "I have relations who would not agree ! But why do you dislike people who take their own line ? "

"It would be awkward if one's tenants did so ; but perhaps my feeling springs from envy. The rest of us can't do what we want. You can't, for example ! "

Grace gave him a keen glance, and then laughed. "On the whole, that is true. We have a number of rules at Tarnside, but one now and then gets some satisfaction from breaking them."

"Rebellion doesn't pay," Thorn rejoined with a touch of dry humour. "You are young and adventurous, but you'll find it prudent, so to speak, to accept your environment and submit. Some people call submission duty, but that's really cant ; they mean it saves them trouble. Anyhow, you cannot make your own code ; when you're born at a place like Tarnside, it's made for you."

CHAPTER II

A DANGEROUS TALENT

DINNER was nearly over at Tarnside. The meal was served with some ceremony, although the bill of fare was frugal except when game could be shot and, as a rule, nobody but Osborn talked much. Now he had satisfied his appetite he looked about the spacious room. The handsome, moulded ceiling was dark from neglect and the cornice was stained by damp. The light of the setting sun streamed in through the long casement window which commanded the shining tarn and the woods that melted into shadow at the mouth of the dale. It was a noble view, but it did not hold Osborn's eyes, for the quivering sunbeams searched out the faded spots on the curtains and the worn patches on the rugs on the polished floor.

"We need a number of new things and I don't know how they're to be got," he remarked, and when Mrs. Osborn said nothing knitted his brows. He had put away some money for renovations, but it had gone. One could not keep money at Tarnside; it vanished and left nothing to show how it had been spent.

"I understand young Askew is back at Ashness," he resumed, looking hard at Grace.

"Yes," said Grace. "I met him not long since."

Osborn frowned. He knew she had met Kit, but did not know if he liked her candour. The girl was independent, but he thought she now understood the responsibilities of her rank.

"The fellow is obviously prosperous, since he's spending a large sum on draining. I saw a big stack of pipes and a number of men at work. My opinion is it's a ridiculous waste of money."

"Perhaps there are worse extravagances," Grace rejoined. "I expect he has some hope of getting his money back by growing better crops. Ours goes and never returns."

Mrs. Osborn gave her a warning glance. Osborn hated

contradiction and Grace and he often jarred, but the girl smiled.

"Father and I are not going to quarrel about Mr. Askew's farming; it is not worth while," she said and studied Osborn with half-penitent sympathy.

"The Askews seem fated to give me trouble," he went on. "Now the fellow has begun to drain his neighbours will expect me to do so. In fact, Black and Pattinson bothered Hayes about some plans for buying pipes when they paid their rent. Besides, the contrast hurts; I don't see why a fellow like Askew should be able to waste money on rash experiments when we have not enough. However, this leads to another matter; Gerald comes back to-morrow, and will, no doubt, grumble about his poverty. If he does, you must give him nothing. He has his pay and I make him an allowance. I won't have his extravagance encouraged."

Grace smiled as Mrs. Osborn got up with a disturbed look. "Mother cannot have much to give and I have nothing at all. I'm afraid Gerald's talent for begging will be used in vain."

She went out with Mrs. Osborn, and when they had gone Osborn, crossing the floor to the sideboard, filled his glass to the top. This was his regular habit and its futility escaped him, although he knew his wife and daughter knew. He felt he did enough if he exercised some self-denial when they were about.

In the meantime, Mrs. Osborn sat down on the terrace and looked across the untidy lawn.

"We need a new pony mower; Jenkins cannot keep the grass in order with the small machine. He was very obstinate about the bedding plants he wanted to buy and the borders look thin, but I felt I must be firm," she said and added drearily: "I wonder when we shall be forced to get a sporting tenant and live in a smaller house."

"Father would not leave Tarnside. I suppose you don't know how things are really going?"

"I know they are not going well and suspect they get worse; but he will not tell me. One could help if one did know."

"I'm afraid I have disappointed father and given you

anxieties you need not have had," Grace replied with some bitterness. "After all, however, the fault is hardly mine. I wanted to make my own career, but was not allowed; to work at a useful occupation would somehow have humiliated our ridiculous pride, and there was, of course, only one hope left for you." She paused, and coloured as she resumed: "Well, although I am not sorry, it looks as if that hope had gone."

"It would have been a relief if you had made a good marriage," Mrs. Osborn admitted. "Still, since you met nobody you liked——"

"The men I might perhaps have liked were poor. Father would, no doubt, think it my natural perversity, or our bad luck; but I don't believe in luck. It's an excuse for weak makeshifts and futilities; one can conquer bad fortune if one is resolute."

"None of us, except you, has much resolution," Mrs. Osborn remarked and sighed. "So far, your firmness has not helped much; I imagine you know your father has not given up hope."

"Yes," said Grace, rather harshly. "I do know, and that is why I am often impatient. He will not be persuaded the thing's impossible."

"After all, Alan has some advantages."

"He has many drawbacks," Grace rejoined, and then her face softened and she gave her mother an appealing look. "I thought you were on my side!"

"I am on your side where you feel strongly. Perhaps I am reserved and you do not often give me your confidence."

"I'm sorry. We are seldom quite honest at Tarnside; somehow one can't be oneself, but now we must be frank. I don't like Alan Thorn; I never liked him. It's impossible."

"Then, my dear, there is no more to be said."

Grace made a sign of disagreement. "There may be much; that is why I am disturbed. You and I don't count, mother; we are expected to submit. It isn't that I don't like Alan; I shrink from him. He is cunning and knows how to wait. Sometimes his patience frightens me."

"But why should his patience frighten you?"

"Oh!" said Grace, "can't you understand? You know

father's habits and that Gerald is following him. You know our debts are mounting up and this can't go on. Some day we may be ruined and then I think Alan will seize his chance. Perhaps I'm imaginative—but such things happen."

Mrs. Osborn put her hand on the girl's arm and her touch was unusually firm. "You may be alarmed for nothing, my dear. But if the time should come when my help is really needed, it will be yours."

Grace kissed her. "I can trust you. I was weak—I'm sometimes a coward—but now I'm comforted."

They were silent for a few minutes and then Mrs. Osborn looked up.

"Is it prudent for you to meet Christopher Askew again?"

Grace coloured, but met her mother's glance and answered with thoughtful calm: "I see no danger. I liked Kit before he went away, but our friendship was really not romantic. When father met us in Redmire Wood, a horribly silly impulse made me hide. I blush when I think about it and imagine I forgot I had grown up—Gerald and I used to hide when father was angry. Anyhow, I made Kit Askew hide and he was first to remember and step into the road."

"But this happened long since and he is older."

"Yes," said Grace, "he's different, although one feels that he has kept a promise made in his half-developed stage. He has been out in the world and done strenuous things, while I stopped at home and played at make-believe. He talks like a man who knows his value and there's a touch of distinction in his look; a stupid word, but it comes near what I mean."

Mrs. Osborn glanced at her sharply, but Grace smiled. "Don't be disturbed, mother; I am trying to tell you all I think. We were friends, but I imagine Kit knows his drawbacks from our point of view. Besides, after father quarrelled with Peter Askew I never sent Kit a message and he must have thought I acquiesced. In a way, I did acquiesce; it was the best thing to be done. You see what this implied? If I had loved him, it meant I had no pluck

and was ashamed to acknowledge a farmer's son. But he knew I did not love him and understood that our friendship would not bear the strain of father's disapproval. Either way, it hinted that I was weak and not worth pursuing. Well, he met me without embarrassment and we talked about nothing important. I may meet him now and then, but that, I think, is all."

"Very well," said Mrs. Osborn, who looked relieved. "Perhaps it would be prudent not to meet him often."

Gerald Osborn came home next day and not long afterwards Kit found him lying on the gravel beside a tarn on the Ashness moor. Heavy rain had fallen, but the clouds had rolled away and the water shone with dazzling light. The sky was clear except for a bank of mist floating about the round top of a fell, and a swollen beck sparkled among the heather. The wind had dropped and it was very hot.

When he heard Kit's steps Gerald looked up. He was a handsome young man, with some charm of manner, although it was obvious now and then that he had inherited a touch of his father's pride. His glance was keen and intelligent, but his mouth and chin were weak. Gerald had talent, but was very like Osborn, since he was sometimes rashly obstinate and sometimes vacillating.

"Hallo!" he said. "I expect I ought to have asked your leave before I came to fish. I hope you don't mind."

"I don't mind. Nobody asks my leave," Kit replied. "Have you had much luck?"

Gerald opened his creel and showed him a number of small dark-coloured trout. "Pretty good. They rose well until the light got strong. Then I thought I'd take a rest. Will you smoke a cigarette?"

Kit sat down and looked across the shining water at the silver bent-grass that gleamed among vivid green moss on the side of the hill.

"You must find this a pleasant change from town. Are you stopping long?"

"A fortnight; that's all I get. I wish I could stop for good. It's rot to spend one's life working in a bank."

"I suppose one must work at something," Kit remarked.

"I don't see why, unless you're forced. The only object

for working is when you must work to live, and it isn't mine, because I can't live on my pay. In fact, the futility of the thing is plain."

Kit laughed. Gerald's humorous candour was part of his charm, but Kit thought it deceptive.

"Why did you go to the bank, then?"

"Because my father thought I ought. I expect you know he believes in the firm hand. I wanted to stop at Tarnside, which would have cost him less. Besides, I could have looked after the estate. It will be mine some time; that is, as much as is left."

"But Hayes transacts the business."

"Just so," said Gerald, rather dryly. "What do you think about Hayes?"

"He is your father's agent and has nothing to do with me. I imagine he's a capable manager."

"I sometimes think he's too capable," Gerald rejoined.

Kit let this go. Before he went away he had suspected that Hayes had plans his employer would not approve, and he knew Gerald was shrewd. It was, however, not his business and he remarked: "You wanted to go to Woolwich, didn't you?"

"I did not," Gerald declared. "As a matter of fact, I said so, but my objections didn't count. I might have made a good farmer or land-steward, but a number of us had been soldiers and that was enough. I don't know if it was a logical argument, but I had to go, and on the whole it was a relief when they turned me out. Too many regulations for my independent taste! Rules are good, perhaps, so long as they're made for somebody else."

He was silent for a few minutes and Kit mused. He thought there was some bitterness in Gerald's humour; it looked as if Osborn had not been wise when he planned his son's career without consulting him. This, however, was typical. Osborn was satisfied to give orders and expected others to accept his point of view.

"Well," said Gerald, getting up, "I must be off. Rather a bore to walk to Tarnside, and the trout will probably rise again if there's wind enough to make a ripple, but I forgot to ask for sandwiches."

"If you lunch with me, you could come back afterwards," Kit suggested, and they set off down the hill.

When they reached Ashness, Gerald tried to hide his surprise. Kit had made some changes in the old house and so far kept to the Spanish rule of meals. Luuch was a late breakfast, well served in china and silver that were seldom used in Peter Askew's time. The low room had been cleverly painted and a casement commanding a view of the dale replaced the original narrow windows. Specimens of ancient Indian pottery stood on the sideboard, and there were curtains of embroidered silk, feather-flowers, and silverwork that Kit had brought from Spanish America. The things gave the lonely farmstead an exotic touch, but they implied the command of money and cultivated taste.

"You have a beautiful room," Gerald remarked, when the meal was over. "Don't know that I'm much of a connoisseur, but some of the things look rather fine."

"I'll show them to you presently," Kit replied and gave Gerald a small, dark cigar. "I wonder how you'll like the flavour."

"Our club cigars are dear and good, but the best is nothing like this," Gerald declared after a minute or two. "Where did they come from?"

"They were given me in Cuba; I believe the make is not offered for public sale. In a general way, Cuban tobacco is not what it was, but there are belts of soil that grow a leaf that can't be equalled anywhere else."

"I suppose they keep the crop for presidents and dictators. The quality indicates it," Gerald suggested, and Kit smiled.

Gerald tasted his black coffee. "If it's not bad form, where did you get this? There's nothing of the kind in Cumberland, and it's better than the Turkish they give you at London."

"It came from a Costa Rican *hacienda*, and was a gift. I'll get no more when the bag is done. If you come back in a month, you'll find me living in plain north-country style."

"I imagine you made up for that while you were away," said Gerald, who rose and went to the sideboard. "A

curious little jar and obviously old! Is this the kind of thing the Aztecs made?"

"I rather think it is Aztec, though I didn't buy it in Mexico. I gave about a pound for the jar and found a gold onza inside."

"An *onza*? Oh, yes, an ounce! The kind of coin some countries mint but very seldom use. Something of a bargain!"

"I suppose it was," Kit replied. "For all that, the onza wasn't mine, and in a sense my efforts to find the owner cost me a very large sum."

Gerald gave him a keen glance. Askew was not boasting; he had enjoyed the command of money.

"Well," he said, "I think I'd have kept the onza, whether it was mine or not." He paused and pulled a knife from its sheath. The handle was ornamented and the narrow blade glittered in the light, although its point was dull. "But what is this? Has it a story?"

"Take care!" said Kit. "It may be poisoned; the *Meztisos* use a stuff that will kill you if a very small quantity gets into your blood. The fellow who owned that knife came near burying it in my back."

"It looks as if you had had some adventures," Gerald remarked, and leaning against the sideboard he lighted a cigarette.

Kit crossed the floor and stood by the open window. The shadow of a cloud rested motionless, a patch of cool neutral colour, on the gleaming yellow side of the hill. A wild-cherry tree hung over a neighbouring wall, and bees hummed drowsily among the flowers. He was strangely satisfied to be at home, and it was hard to realise that not long since he had been engaged in a dangerous trade among the fever-haunted swamps.

"Have you any more curiosities?" Gerald asked.

Kit opened a drawer in his big desk, where he kept specimens of featherwork. As he took them out he moved some documents and Gerald indicated one.

"*Cristobal Askew?* Your name in Castillian, I suppose? You write a curious hand."

"A matter of precaution! Anyhow, I didn't sign this

order, and that's why I kept it. The thing was rather important and we were lucky to find out the cheat in time, particularly as I imagined nobody could imitate my hand. You'll see my proper signature on the next document."

"It's not a very good counterfeit," said Gerald, who compared the writing with the other. "This is a subject I know something about. Penmanship is one of my few talents and I keep the customers' signature book at the bank. Yours is an uncommon hand, but it could be forged. Let's see! May I use this paper?"

Kit nodded, and Gerald, knitting his brows, wrote the name three or four times and then looked up.

"I think I've got it. Hard to tell which is genuine, if you put them side by side?"

"Yes," said Kit. "I'm not sure I could tell which is mine."

Gerald laughed. "One has to study these things; part of my job, you see, and banks are cheated oftener than people think. However, I expect you want to get to work and I'll go back to the tarn."

He went out and Kit tore up the paper. He thought a talent like Gerald's might be dangerous if it were used by an unscrupulous man.

CHAPTER III

THE HORSE SHOW

IT was a calm evening and Osborn sat on the terrace, studying a printed notice. Mrs. Osborn poured out coffee at a small table, and Gerald and Grace occupied the top of the broad steps to the lawn. The sun was low, the air was cool, and except for the soft splash of a beck, a deep quietness brooded over the dale.

"It will be a good show," Osborn remarked, reaching for a cup. "I insisted on the rather early date, because if we had waited until the hay was in, we might have got

wet weather. Two or three objected, but I'm satisfied. I took the proper line. One must be firm with an argumentative committee."

Gerald's eyes smiled as he looked at Grace. Osborn generally was firm with people who gave way, and Gerald had heard some grumbling about his changing the date for the horse show.

"It's the last time I'll be president," Osborn resumed. "I had meant to resign, but Thorn could not take the post, Sir George is away, and a well-known local man is needed to give the thing a proper start."

"Rather an expensive honour!" Gerald observed. "The president's expected to make up the shortage if the day is wet."

"That was one reason for my fixing the meeting early, when we often get it fine," Osborn replied naïvely. "The expense is a drawback, but the committee would not let me drop out."

"Mother and Grace will want new hats and clothes, and I expect the job will cost you more than you think. You'll have to give them a lead by bidding for the chapel sheep."

"If that meddlesome fellow Drysdale is going to send his sheep to the show, the arrangement was made without my knowing," Osborn replied angrily.

Mrs. Osborn looked disturbed, but Gerald laughed. He rather enjoyed provoking his father when he thought it safe. Drysdale was treasurer for a body of Nonconformists, who wanted to build a new chapel and, finding the farmers reluctant to give money, had asked for contributions from their flocks and herds.

"The idea was that the sale would be an extra attraction," Gerald went on. "Still, I admit it's hard for you, because you hate chapels and will have to bid. In fact, you'll, no doubt, have to buy the sheep at a sentimental price and sell them at their value."

"I believe in liberty of conscience and do not hate chapels," Osborn rejoined. "For all that, I own to a natural prejudice against people who attend such places, largely because they mix up their religion and political

creeds. It would be strange if I sympathised with their plans for robbing the landlords."

"Anyhow, Drysdale means to bring his flock, and I'm afraid you'll have to pay. The situation has some humour."

Osborn knitted his brows. Hayes had been talking to him about the estate accounts and he had resolved to practise stern economy. Economy was needful, unless he gave a fresh mortgage to pay the interest on his other debts; and here was an expense he had not bargained for.

"If I'd known about Drysdale, I'd have resigned," he said. "I took the post again because there was nobody else."

"They might have tried Askew," Gerald suggested.

"Askew? A fellow of no importance, unknown outside the dale!"

"I imagine he'll be better known soon, and he's rather a good sort. Gave me a very good lunch not long since and has obviously spent something on the farm. His room is like a museum, and he has a number of valuable things. Seems to have had some adventures abroad, and found them profitable."

"You mean he tried to impress you by vague boasting?"

"No," said Gerald. "I don't think he did; the fellow's not that kind. In fact, he's rather good form, and has somehow got the proper stamp."

Grace looked at her brother, as if she agreed; but Osborn remarked ironically, "You imagine yourself a judge?"

"Oh, well," said Gerald smiling, "I've had the advantage of being brought up at Tarnside, and belong to a good London club. Anyhow, Askew's much less provincial than some of our exclusive friends."

He strolled off and Osborn went to the library, where he spent some time studying his accounts. The calculations he made were disturbing and he resented the possibility of his being forced to help Drysdale's fund. Nevertheless, the president of the show would be expected to lead the bidding and the Osborns did things properly.

A week or two afterwards, Mrs. Osborn opened the show

in a field by the market-town, which stood in a hollow among the moors. The grass sloped to a river that sparkled in the sun and then vanished in the alders' shade. Across the stream, old oak and ash trees rolled up the side of the Moot Hill, and round the latter grey walls and roofs showed among the leaves. A spire and a square, ivy-covered tower rose above the faint blue haze of smoke. A few white clouds floated in the sky and their cool shadows crept slowly across the field.

The horses were not very numerous, but the show had other attractions and was an excuse for a general holiday. The crowd was larger than usual, Mrs. Osborns' nervous speech was cheered, and for a time Osborn forgot that the office he had taken might cost him something. He was carrying out a duty he owed to the neighbourhood and felt that he could do so better than anybody else. He did not admit that he liked to take the leading place.

His first annoyance came with the sheep-dog trials. He had not known Askew was a competitor and frowned as he saw Grace go up to him when a flock of Herdwicks entered the field. The girl ought to have seen that it was not the proper thing for his daughter to proclaim her acquaintance with the fellow. Then Gerald followed her, and began to talk to Askew as if he knew him well. Gerald was, of course, irresponsibly eccentric, but his folly jarred.

Grace had found it needful to get a new dress and hat, and Kit thrilled and tried to hide his delight in her beauty as she advanced. His rough-coated dog ran to meet her and she stroked its shaggy head.

"I hope Bob is going to win," she remarked.

"It's doubtful," Kit replied. "He's clever, but they don't give us much time and he's getting slow. One or two of his rivals are very good."

"You'll do your best, old Bob," said Grace, and the dog, looking up at her with friendly eyes, beat his tail on the ground.

Then Gerald came up, and soon afterwards the judges tied a string to a farmer's leg and fastened the other end to a post. This allowed him to run a short distance, after which he must direct his dog by voice.

"First trial, Mr. Forsyth's Merry Lad," a steward announced, and the crowd gathered round when the judge took out his watch.

Furze bushes had been stuck into the ground to simulate a broken hedge. Beyond these was a row of hurdles with an open gate, and then a number of obstacles, while a railed pen occupied a corner of the field. Kit gave Grace a card showing the way the sheep must be driven round the different barriers.

"It's a good test, particularly as we can't follow the dogs and they must take each obstacle in its proper turn."

"They are wonderfully clever to understand," said Grace, and stopped when the judge shouted, "Time!"

The farmer called his dog, a handsome smooth-haired collie, that set off with a bound and drove the sheep at full speed towards the furze. As they came up, with fleeces shaking and a patter of little feet, the man ran to the length of the string and waved his stick.

"Away back! Gan away back! T'ither slap, ye fule!"

People laughed when the dog in desperate haste stopped the sheep as they packed outside a hole, but it drove them to the next gap, through which they streamed.

"Forrad! Gan forrad!" cried the farmer. "Head them, Merry Lad!"

The dog turned the sheep and brought them back through another opening, after which they raced towards the hurdles, and the collie hesitated as if puzzled by its master's shouts. The sheep were near the end of the rails, but it was not the end the card indicated. Then the dog seemed to understand what was required and, circling round the flock with swift, graceful leaps, drove them along the hurdles and round the other end.

There was some applause from the crowd and afterwards good-humoured banter when the dog ran backwards and forwards at a loss. The animal obviously knew the flock must be taken round the remaining obstacles, but had only its master's shouts for guide to the order in which they must be passed. Sometimes the farmer got angry and sometimes laughed, but except for a mistake or two the collie drove the

sheep in and out among the barriers as the card required and put them in the pen.

Two or three more trials took place, and for the most part, the unoccupied dogs strained at their leads and whimpered, but Old Bob sat at Kit's feet, watching, with his head on one side.

"One can see he's thinking; I believe he wants to remember the right way round," Grace remarked, and smiled when a steward beckoned Kit. "It's your turn," she said. "I wish you good-luck!"

Kit went off with his heart beating and felt half amused by his keenness when the steward tied the string to his leg. After his adventures on the Carribean and the stakes he and Adam had played for, it was strange he should be eager to win a box of plated forks at a rustic show. Yet, he was eager; Grace had wished him luck.

"Number four; Mr. Askew's Old Bob!" the steward announced.

Kit called, and Bob, trotting away deliberately, got the sheep together and drove them correctly through the holes. He was doing well, in one sense, and Kit knew he would make few mistakes, but time counted and Old Bob was slow. He had trouble at the hurdles, where the sheep seemed resolved to go the wrong way, but he stopped them and took them back to the proper end. Kit gave very few orders, although he looked at his watch rather anxiously. Bob understood and could be trusted to do his work, the trouble was he might not finish it in time. At length, Kit drew a deep breath, and put back his watch. The sheep were in the pen and there was a minute left.

Kit went back to Grace, and Bob trotted up, panting, with his tongue hanging out. He looked at Kit, as if for approval; and then, after wagging his tail when his master spoke, held up his paw to Grace.

"Hallo!" said Kit. "I haven't known him do that before. It's not a sheepdog's trick."

"I taught him," Grace replied, with a touch of colour. "He has not forgotten, and really deserves to be stroked."

She went away, but she gave Kit a smile across the railing,

behind which she stood with Mrs. Osborn, when the judge called out :

" First prize, Number Four ; Mr. Askew's Bob ! "

When lunch was served in a big tent Osborn sat at the top of the table, but his satisfaction had vanished. For one thing, everybody had applauded when Askew won the prize ; the fellow was obviously a favourite and this annoyed him. Then, Drysdale's sheep were to be sold by auction after lunch and the committee had hinted that the president was the proper person to buy the flock. Drysdale sat next to Kit at the bottom of the table. He was a little, shabbily-dressed man, with a brown face, and a twinkling smile.

" Where are the sheep ? " Kit asked.

" We'll send t' band for them presently. Are you gan t' bid ? "

" I don't know until I've seen them. What about their quality ? "

" Weel, it might be better ; they're gifts, you ken. There's a young ram might suit you ; he's true Carlside strain."

" I don't know how you got him then. I can't see Mayson giving away good breeding stock."

Drysdale grinned. " Some big stanes fell on t' ram when Mayson was bringing flock doon Barra ghyll. He looks a bit the waur o' it, but you can tell the Carlside blood."

" I'll see what I think about the animal," Kit said with a laugh. " Do you expect a good sale ? The rich people, as a rule, go to church."

" They'll bid aw t' same. When you canna stir their generosity, you can try their pride. If you look at it one way, the thing's humoursome. They dinna want to help me, but they will."

" It's possible," Kit agreed. " I don't know if the plan's above suspicion, but you need the money."

" It will be weel spent. Hooiver, I must be off and see the band dinna get ower much to drink."

Drysdale went away and soon afterwards a strange procession, headed by the band and guarded by children, entered the field. A row of geese, waddling solemnly in single file, came first, and then turkeys stalked among their

broods; a boy led a handsome goat and long-legged calf; and in the rear straggled a flock of sheep. When all were driven into pens the sale began and the crowd laughed and bantered the men who bid. In the meantime, Kit examined the sheep. Some had faults and the ram had obviously suffered from its accident. It was clear, though, that it sprang from a famous stock, and Kit knew an animal transmits to its offspring inherited qualities and not acquired defects. He recognised the stamp of breeding and resolved to buy the sheep. The ram was worth much more than he imagined the shepherds thought.

He went back to the stand and by and by the auctioneer praised the flock. When he stopped, there was silence for a few moments until Osborn nodded.

"A cautious beginning often makes a good ending, but we've a long way to go yet," the auctioneer remarked. "Who'll say five pounds more?"

Thorn made a sign, and the auctioneer raised his hammer. "We've got agate, but you must keep it up. The opportunity's what folks call unique; you'll save money by buying and help a good cause. Don't know which will appeal to you, but you can pay your money, and take your choice."

He looked about while the crowd laughed, and after two or three flockmasters advanced the price caught Kit's eye. "Mr. Askew's a judge of sheep. We'll call it ten pounds rise!"

Kit nodded, and Osborn glanced at Thorn, who shrugged. The latter had helped to start the bidding, which was all he meant to do, and Osborn would have tried to draw out after making another offer, had he not seen Kit. He did not want the sheep, although he was willing to buy them at something above their proper price. Now, however, Askew was his antagonist, the fellow must be beaten.

"We must finish the sale before the driving matches," he said. "Go up to twenty pounds."

"They'd not sell near it if you sent them to the market," a farmer remarked.

"Do you sell pedigree stock to butchers? The ram's worth the money," the auctioneer rejoined.

On the whole, Kit agreed, although he saw that others did

not. Moreover, he was willing to run some risk by helping Drysdale, whom he liked, and he signed to the auctioneer. The farmers stopped, but Osborn went on. He had not liked Peter Askew and liked Kit less. Father and son had opposed him, and now the young uspstart was proud of the money he had, no doubt, got by doubtful means. He would not let the fellow baulk him, and his face got red as he answered the auctioneer's inquiring glance. Presently he turned with a frown as Hayes touched his arm.

"It's an extravagant price," the agent remarked. "They'll want a cheque and your account is getting very low."

"You'll have to cut down expenses, then," Osborn answered haughtily. "This is not a matter about which I need your advice."

Hayes shrugged and Osborn nodded to the auctioneer when Kit made another bid. He felt hot and savage and wanted a drink but could not leave the stand. Askew meant to humiliate him and he must hold out. He was the most important man in the neighbourhood, and must not be beaten by a small farmer. For all that, the sum he would have to pay would be a drain.

After the next bid the auctioneer looked at Kit, who smiled and shook his head.

"Mr. Osborn takes the lot," the auctioneer remarked. "He has paid a high price to help a good object, but I think we all hope the next lambing season will give him his money back."

Osborn's savage satisfaction was spoiled by a chilling doubt and he went off to look for Hayes.

"Give the fellow a cheque for the sheep on the estate account," he said.

"How much?" Hayes asked and looked thoughtful when Osborn told him.

"There are a number of bills to meet and we'll have no money coming in until term-day."

"Can't you put off the bills.

"I think not," Hayes answered meaningly. "It mightn't be prudent. Our credit is not too good."

Osborn was silent for a moment or two. "Very well,"

ne said. "I'll try to sell the sheep to somebody who'll give me what they're really worth. Come over to-morrow and we'll talk about the new mortgage."

Then he went back, moodily, to join the judges for the driving-match.

CHAPTER IV

THE FLOOD

ON the morning after the show, Osborn walked up and down the terrace, waiting moodily for Hayes. It was a rash extravagance to buy the sheep and he blamed Kit for this. The fellow had gone on bidding in order to force him to pay a high price; besides, the money would help an object Osborn did not approve. There were enough chapels in the neighbourhood and any legislation that interfered with the landlord's privileges got its warmest support at such places.

He looked about gloomily. The weather had changed, a moist west wind drove heavy clouds across the sky and the fell-tops were hidden by mist. It threatened a wet hay-time and hay was scarce in the dale, where they generally cut it late after feeding the sheep on the meadows. Osborn farmed some of his land and hoped for a good crop, which he needed. The grass in the big meadow by the beck was long and getting ripe, but the red sorrel that grew among it had lost its bright colour. The filling heads rolled in waves before the wind, but there was something dull and lifeless in the noise they made, and Osborn knew what this meant. Rain was coming and when rain began in the dale it did not stop.

His glance rested on the green embankment along the beck. His father had made the dyke at a heavy cost, but in places the stones and soil had gradually washed away. If the dyke broke at one spot, the beck would return to its old channel and much damage might be done, particularly

if the flood rolled across the turnip fields. Osborn had meant to strengthen the dyke, but had put it off because of the expense.

A little later Hayes came up the steps.

"I have seen Fisher and he is willing to take a mortgage on Ryecote," he said. "The interest is higher than I thought, but the money would pay off urgent bills and cover the cost of the farmstead repairs."

"How much does Fisher want?" Osborn asked and frowned when he was told. "It's unjust; two per cent. above the proper interest."

"I can't borrow for less. However, if we use the money judiciously, we ought to get something back by higher rents. Lang and Grey, for example, would pay a little more for the improvements they require."

Osborn pondered. He was in a suspicious mood and thought Hayes wanted to negotiate the mortgage.

"When I have satisfied the other tenants there won't be much left for Lang and Grey," he rejoined. "My experience is that the money you sink in improvements is gone for good."

"They must be made, for all that; particularly just now when a dissatisfied spirit is spreading among the farmers. Askew is showing them what can be done by the proper use of capital."

"Askew!" Osborn exclaimed. "Father and son, the Askews have been the origin of the worst trouble I've had."

Hayes was willing to indulge Osborn's rancour and derived a rather malicious satisfaction from seeing him annoyed. Besides, he did not want to dwell upon the mortgage.

"I wonder whether you know Askew has bought Drysdale's sheep?"

"I did not know. I sold the flock to Graham."

"Then Askew must have bought them soon afterwards, unless he sent Graham to make the deal with you."

Osborn's face got red. "A shabby trick! Unthinkably shabby, after he forced up the price." He paused, and tried to control his anger. "But why did he buy that second-class lot?"

"There was a Carlside ram."

"Only fit for mutton; I studied the animal."

"Oh, well! Askew, no doubt, thinks he is a judge. I imagine he bought the others in order to get the ram."

"He cheated me," said Osborn, with a savage frown. "The fellow's a cunning rogue. I wish he hadn't come back—confound him!" He pulled himself up and added: "However, about the mortgage? I suppose I must agree to Fisher's terms. See him and arrange the thing as soon as possible."

Hayes went away and Osborn lighted a cigar. He had a disturbing feeling that he had been rash. The money would not last long, and if he had not borrowed it, he might have paid the interest on other loans. Buying the sheep had really decided him to give the mortgage, since it had made him feel keenly the embarrassment of having very little money at command. There was another thing; Hayes wanted him to borrow the fresh sum, although a prudent agent would try to keep the estate out of debt. He could not see Hayes' object and felt suspicious, but while he pondered it began to rain and he went into the house.

It rained all day and at dusk the mist had crept down the hills. There was no promise of better weather when Osborn went to bed, and he had known rain like that last for a week. In fact, he had known all the hay crop and the most part of the young turnips washed down the valley.

The rain was heavier when, early next morning, Kit went out to move some sheep from a spot where the rising water might cut them off. He came back along the meadow dyke and stopped for a few minutes when he reached its weakest place. Reeds and tufts of heather whirled down the brown flood. Wide patches of turf and soil had fallen away, uncovering the foundation of boulders and gravel, and while Kit looked down a heavy stone rolled out of its place and plunged into the stream. Others were ready to go; the water was rising ominously fast and would rise for some time after the rain stopped. There was, however, nothing to indicate that it would stop, and Kit, knowing his native climate, looked about with some uneasiness.

A hollow crossed the meadow to a hedge, behind which were two large turnip fields, and he knew this marked a former channel of the beck. It was long since the water had flowed that way, but his father had told him that in heavy floods it had sometimes spread across the fields and joined the other stream at Allerby. If this happened again, the bottom of the dale would be covered and the crops ruined. When he was going away, three or four men with picks and spades came up.

"Are you going to mend the dyke?" he asked.

"We're gan to try," said one. "I reckon we'll not can hoad her up if the beck rises much."

"She'll rise three or four feet," said Kit. "Is nobody else coming?"

"Neabody we ken aboot. Mr. Osborn sent to Allerby first thing, but miller wadn't let him have a man."

Bell had given up the mill and his successor had a dispute with Hayes. To repair the dyke properly would be a long and expensive business, since there were a number of weak spots, but a dozen men, working hard, might perhaps strengthen the threatened part sufficiently to bear the strain. Clearly, if they were to be of use, they must be found and set to work at once. In a sense, the risk was Osborn's, who would pay for his neglect, but the flood might damage his tenants' fields, and even if the damage were confined to Osborn's, Kit hated to see crops spoiled.

"You had better begin," he said. "I'll try to get help."

"Mayhappen folks will come for you, though they wadn't for t' maister," one replied. "We'll need aw you can get before lang."

Kit set off as fast as he could walk and, stopping for a minute at Ashness, sent his men. Then he went on to Allerby and at first found the farmers unwilling to move, but after some argument they went with him to the mill.

"We'll hear what the miller has to say," one remarked. "He kens maist aboot the job, sin' he had t' mend t' lade when Hayes refused. For aw that, mending dyke is landlord's business."

"I'll not stir a hand to save Osborn's crops," the miller declared when he met them at the door. "His oad rogue

o' an agent promised me he'd build up brocken lade, but when time came I had to do't mysel."

Two of the others grumbled about promises Hayes had not kept, and then Kit said, "All this is not important. I don't ask you to mend the dyke for Osborn's sake but yours. If the beck breaks through and runs down to Allerby, it will spoil all the hay and fill the mill-lead with rubbish."

"Then we'll get compensation. Landlord's bound to keep dyke in order."

Kit smiled. "You'll get nothing, unless you go to law and I don't know if you'll get much then. Hayes is clever and the dispute would be expensive. You'll certainly find it cheaper to mend the dyke."

They pondered this, until the miller made a sign of agreement.

"I'll not say you're wrang. I'm coming with my two men."

Kit told him to bring a horse and cart and the party set off for the threatened bank. The beck had risen while Kit was away and stones and soil slipped down into the flood. An angry turmoil indicated that the current had rolled the rubbish into a dam.

"We've gotten our job," said the miller as he drove in his spade.

They got to work, but the current that undermined the bank brought down the turf and soil with which they tried to fill the holes. It was plain that a stronger material was needed and Kit sent some men to a roadmakers' quarry at the bottom of the fell while he rearranged some harness. When he had finished he fastened an extra horse outside the shafts of the carts and two men drove the teams across the field. Then went off fast, jolting the carts by their clumsy trot, but Kit knew the extra horse would be needed when they returned. Soon afterwards, Osborn came up the other bank and stopped opposite with the rain running off his mackintosh.

"Has anybody given you leave to meddle with the dyke?" he asked.

"No," said Kit. "We'll let it alone, if you like, but there

won't be much of your hay left when the flood breaks through, and I imagine you could be made responsible for other damage."

Osborn hesitated and Kit, seeing his frown, began to wonder whether he would send him away. Then he resumed: "Who engaged these men?"

"I don't know that they are engaged. Anyhow, if there's a difficulty about their getting paid, I'm accountable."

"Bring them to Tarnside when you have finished," Osborn answered and went off.

Kit resumed his work with savage energy. When he had stone enough he and one or two others stood on the front of the bank with the water washing round their legs while they built up the ragged blocks. The pieces were hard to fit and sometimes the rude wall broke when the men on top threw down the backing of soil. Kit tore his hand on a sharp corner, but persisted while the blood ran down his fingers and his wet clothes stuck to his skin. The others supported him well and he only stopped for breath and to wipe from his eyes the water that trickled off his soaked hat. The loaded cart, ploughing through the mire, met the other going back; the men at the quarry kept him supplied, and when he had made a foundation the bank began to rise. For all that, the beck rose almost as fast, and at noon they had not gained much on the flood. Kit was doubtful, but on the whole thought it prudent to let the men stop. They had worked hard and could not keep it up without a rest.

When they collected with their dinner cans under a dripping hedge, one remarked: "Mayhappen we'd better not wait for Osborn to send cold meat and ale. I'll mak' a start with bread and cheese."

The others grinned, but Kit got up as he heard a rattle of wheels. "Don't begin just yet. Two of you go to the gate."

The men came back with a big jar and a basket, and the others gathered round when Kit took off the clean, wet cloth.

"Yon lunch niver came fra Tarnside; it's ower good and

liberal," said one. "Ashness folk dinna believe in sending a half-empty jar."

When they had eaten and drunk, one or two tried to light their pipes but gave it up and got to work again.

The mist got thicker and the rain swept the valley. The long grass near the trench was trodden into pulp, where the turf was cut, the surface of the bank melted, and the men stumbled as they climbed it with their loads. The wheelbarrows poured down water as well as sticky soil, and Kit's clothes got stiff with mud. Despite this, he held out until, in the evening, the strengthened dyke stood high above the stream. Then he threw down his spade and stretched his aching arms.

"I think she'll hold the water back and we can do no more," said Kit.

The others gathered up their tools and climbing into the carts drove down the dale. When they reached the Tarnside lodge Kit pulled up.

"You have done a good job for Osborn and there's no reason you shouldn't get your pay," he said.

Two or three jumped down, without much enthusiasm, and the old gardener came out and gave one an envelope.

"For Mr. Askew," he remarked.

"Is that all?" the other asked, and the gardener grinned.

"That's all. What did you expect?"

The man took the envelope to Kit and the rest waited with some curiosity. They were very tired and big drops fell on them as the wind shook the dripping trees. Kit opened the envelope and his face flushed as he took out a note addressed to Hayes.

"Pay C. Askew and the men whose names follow one day's wages, on estate account," it ran.

This was all and the sum noted at the bottom represented the lowest payment for unskilled labour. Kit handed the note to his companions, and while some laughed ironically two or three swore.

"Next time beck's in flood Osborn can mend his dyke himsel'," said one. "If five minutes' digging wad save Tarnside Hall, I'd sooner lose my hay than stir a hand!"

Then they got into the carts, and drove off in the rain.

CHAPTER V

KIT TELLS A STORY

THE rain stopped at night, the next day was fine and in the afternoon Kit went up the dale to look at the mended dyke. It had stood better than he thought, the beck was falling, and Osborn's fields were safe until another flood came down. Kit did not know if he was pleased or not. There was some satisfaction in feeling that he had done a good job, but he did not think Osborn deserved the help his neighbours had given.

Kit was human and owned that he had felt savage when he read Osborn's note. The fellow had meant to humiliate him, and he got hot again as he thought about it. Moreover, Osborn had, so to speak, for his sake, insulted the men he had persuaded to help. They had not worked for wages, when they had fought the swollen beck, and some kindly acknowledgment, such as a supper at the hall, would have gone far to gain for Osborn a good will that money could not buy. Anyhow, since he had offered pay, the sum ought to have been a just reward for their toil.

Osborn had been led by personal rancour, and there was no use in Kit's pretending he did not resent it. The fellow seemed to think he had a right to command, and got savage when people would not obey. Kit felt he had done nothing to deserve his hatred, but since Osborn did hate him, he must brace himself for a struggle, and he meant to win. Then, as he knocked out his pipe, he saw Grace.

For a few moments Kit hesitated. If Grace knew how Osborn had rewarded him, the meeting might be awkward, but there was nothing to be gained by putting it off. He meant to marry Grace, whether Osborn approved or not, and to some extent frankness was needful. He waited until she reached the bridge and got up when she stopped. There was some colour in her face, but she gave him a steady look.

"I have been to see the mended dyke," she said, and he knew that she had pluck.

"It's a rough job. There was no time to finish it neatly."

"I'm surprised you were able to finish it at all."

"I mustn't claim all the credit," Kit rejoined smiling. "There were a number of others as well as the Tarnside men."

Grace made an impatient gesture. "Our men could have done nothing useful if they had been left alone, and the others wouldn't have helped if you had not persuaded them. Why did you?"

"To some extent, my object was selfish. If the flood had broken through, it might have done much damage to all the crops, besides your father's."

"It could not have damaged yours."

"Oh, well," said Kit, "I hate to see things spoiled, and am afraid I'm meddlesome."

Grace's colour rose, but she fixed her eyes on him. "That is not kind; I hardly think it's just. I have not accused you of meddling."

"No," said Kit, "I'm sorry! It was a stupid remark. But I expect you know what your father thinks."

Grace was silent for a few moments. She did know and would rather not have met Kit, but was too proud to turn back. Besides, she felt her father was prejudiced, and although it was a family tradition that the Osborns stood together, she rebelled and wanted to be just. The situation was embarrassing, but there was no use in pretence.

"I think you were generous and imagine my mother agrees," she said. "She wanted to send some lunch to the beck, but the rain was very heavy and there was nobody to go." Then, remembering something Osborn had said, she hesitated. "I understand your helpers were paid."

"Oh, yes," said Kit, not with malice, but because he saw he must be frank. "I was not left out."

Grace turned her head. This was worse than she had thought. She was angry, and would not let Kit think she approved. Her eyes sparkled as she looked up. "Ah,"

she said, " you deserved something very different ! I wish you had not told me ! "

" I didn't tell you because I was hurt," Kit replied with grave quietness. " It looks as if we had got to face things. Your father thinks me his enemy. I'm not ; I have never tried to injure him, and if the dyke was threatened by another flood, I believe I'd mend it. But, whatever happens, I mean to do what I think proper, and it's possible we may clash again."

" Yes," said Grace. " I am afraid this may happen."

" Well, I value your friendship and don't mean to give it up, but I can't pretend and think you wouldn't be deceived if I tried."

" You mean you would not do what you thought was shabby in order to avoid a clash ? "

" I mean something like that. Now you know how things are, you must choose your line. I can't judge how far your duty to your parents binds you ; you can."

Grace felt her heart beat and was silent for a moment or two.

" I cannot criticise my father's deeds and agree with people who are opposed to him," she said. " All the same, unless he expressly orders it, I cannot give up my friends."

Kit tried to hide his satisfaction. " We'll let it go ; I understand ! "

He expected her to move away, and wondered whether it was tactful for him to stop, but to his surprise she smiled and sat down on the bridge.

" Very well. Suppose we talk about something else. The shade is nice, and I need not go home yet. You promised to tell me about your adventures and your uncle. I think you called him a survival from the old romantic days when pirates haunted the Gulf of Mexico."

Kit pondered as he leaned against the alder trunk. He thought Grace meant to banish the strain ; anyhow, she was willing to stop and he wanted her to do so. It was strangely pleasant to loiter on the bridge with her while the shadows trembled on the road and the beck murmured in the shade. But if he meant to keep her, he must talk, and although he did not want to say much about his adven-

tures he had a story to tell. The story was moving, if he could tell it properly.

"I'm not clever at drawing a portrait, but I'd like to try," he said. "For one thing, my subject's worth the effort; and then, you see, I was fond of Adam. In some ways, he was not romantic; in fact, he was remarkably practical. His bold strokes were made deliberately after calculating the cost; but now and then one got a hint of something strangely romantic, and in a sense extravagant. Yet human nature's curious. When he played out a losing game, knowing he would lose, it was not from sentimental impulse but a firm persuasion it was worth while." He paused, and gave Grace an apologetic glance. "I'm afraid this is rather foggy. Perhaps I'd better begin where I met him, at a Florida hotel—if I'm not boring you."

Grace said she was not bored and Kit, gaining confidence, narrated how they bumped the *Rio Negro* across the surf-swept shoals, landed the guns, and met Alvarez. His own part in their adventures was lightly indicated, but the girl's imagination supplied what he left out. She felt strangely interested as Kit's portrait of his uncle grew into shape, although her thoughts dwelt largely on the artist. Then the background—the steamy swamp, old presidio, and dazzling town—had a romantic fascination, and when he told her about the journey to the mission and the church where the candles that Adam sent burned before the Virgin's shrine, her eyes shone.

"Ah," she said, "I am glad you told me! One thinks better of human nature after hearing a tale like that. In a way, it's a rebuke. Are such men numerous?"

"I have known two. Perhaps it's a coincidence that both were my relations. They're commoner than people think."

"You're an optimist, but one likes optimists," Grace remarked with a gentle smile. "However, what had the president done to deserve the sacrifice your uncle made?"

"I never knew, but suspect it was something against the laws of his country. If I told my story properly, you would understand that both were buccaneers."

"But they had their code! I like the president and your

uncle was very fine. One feels moved when one thinks about the shabby little altar and the candles love had lighted that never went out—all those years! Adam's wife loved him. She went to nurse him, although her friends warned her and she knew the risk."

Grace mused for a time and Kit thought her face disturbed. Then she looked up quietly.

"One needs courage to know the risk and not to hesitate. But you will keep those candles burning?"

"Yes," said Kit, "I promised. Besides, I like to think they're burning. It means something."

"It means much," Grace agreed, and after a pause resumed: "You had no doubt about taking up your uncle's engagement with the president, although you saw what it might cost."

"Of course not," Kit replied. "There was nothing else to be done."

Grace smiled and got up. "No," she said, "there was nothing else you could do. Well, I must go home."

Kit went back with her for some distance. They talked but little on the way, but when she left him she gave him her hand and a look that made his heart beat.

Soon after Grace reached Tarnside, Osborn crossed the lawn to the tea-table where she and Mrs. Osborn sat beneath a spreading copper-beech. His face was thoughtful when Mrs. Osborn gave him a cup.

"I met the post as I was driving home," he said. "There's a letter from Gerald."

"Has he any news?" Mrs. Osborn asked.

"Nothing important. He's well and says he's kept occupied, which is fortunate. In fact, the harder they work him, the better; I'd sooner Gerald did not have so much time on his hands."

"Then why did he write?" Grace asked, because Gerald's letters were by no means regular.

"I hope he did not want money," Mrs. Osborn remarked.

"No," said Osborn. "That is, he did not want it for himself," He hesitated, and then resumed: "He states that if I could raise a moderate sum, he knows how we could

make a very satisfactory profit in a short time. It seems he has got a useful hint."

Grace laughed. "About a racehorse? Gerald is always hopeful, but his confidence in his ability to spot the winner is dangerous It has been so often misplaced."

"This has nothing to do with racing," Osborn rejoined angrily. "Gerald knows the consequences of indulging his folly again. There's a difference between betting and buying shares."

"I don't know if the difference is very marked," said Grace, with a curious feeling of annoyance, for there was a note in Osborn's voice that jarred. He was, like Gerald, a gambler, greedy for money he had not earned, and she thought about the story Kit had told. Its hero had risked and lost his life, and Kit had paid in health and fortune, because they put honour before gain. For all that, she knew she had said enough when she saw Osborn's frown.

"Gerald is young, but holds a responsible post and has opportunities of meeting important stock-brokers and business men," Osborn went on, turning to his wife. "He is, of course, optimistic, and has been rash, but after all he may have found out something useful. He declares the venture is absolutely safe."

"But you have no money to invest," Mrs. Osborn insisted anxiously.

"As a matter of fact, I have some. You see, I borrowed a sum not long since on Ryecote."

"Oh!" said Mrs. Osborn, with a resigned gesture, and then braced herself. "But if you have got the money, it ought not to be used for speculation. There is much that needs to be done on the estate."

"That is so; it was my reason for borrowing. All the same, it would be a very long time before I got back what I meant to spend on drains and steadings. Besides, the repairs and improvements need not be made just yet, and I might be able to use the money and earn a good profit first."

"You might lose it all," Mrs. Osborn insisted. "Gerald is rash and business men don't tell young bank-clerks

important secrets. It is hard to own, but perhaps Gerald is not altogether to be trusted."

Osborn moved abruptly. His wife had touched the doubt that made him hesitate; in fact, this was a matter upon which he wanted her advice. She knew her son and had judged right when Osborn had been deceived.

"Well," he said, knitting his brows, "I haven't quite decided. I had thought about asking for particulars, but after all Gerald's hint may not be worth much and unless one is really well informed speculation is dangerous."

He looked round and saw Thorn. The latter had come up without disturbing the group and now joined them with a smile.

"I heard your last remark," he said. "My opinion is your views are sound. It is very rash to speculate on shares you don't know much about."

Mrs. Osborn felt disturbed, because she wondered how much he had heard, but he went on carelessly: "Gerald's too young for one to trust his judgment. My advice is, leave the thing alone."

Grace gave him a grateful glance.

"You really think I had better keep out of it?" Osborn asked.

"Certainly," said Thorn. "Only a few of the big jobbers can form an accurate notion how prices ought to go. For people like us speculation is a plunge in the dark."

Osborn was silent for a few moments, but Grace saw that he was pulled in different ways by caution and greed. Then, to her relief, he made a sign of agreement.

"Oh, well! I'll let the thing alone."

Thorn sat down, and when Mrs. Osborn had given him some tea they talked about other matters. Presently Grace got up and he walked with her across the lawn.

"Were you satisfied with the advice I gave your father?" he asked.

"Yes," said Grace frankly. "I think he was tempted; I was glad you came."

"After all, a hint that he'd better be prudent did not cost me much. You know I'd do more than that to help you."

"You did all that was necessary," Grace replied. "You have my thanks."

Thorn glanced at her keenly, but there was something chilling in her calm.

"Well, I'm going to London in a day or two and it might be advisable to look Gerald up. I will, if you like."

"Yes," said Grace. "If it doesn't give you much trouble."

She left him and Thorn stood still, frowning. Grace was always like that, friendly but elusive. No matter how he tried, he could not break down her reserve.

CHAPTER VI

THORN MAKES A PLAN

THORN went up to town and one evening loitered about the hall of his club. London rather bored him, but he went there now and then, because he felt one ought to keep in touch with things. It was, in a sense, one's duty to know what was going on, and the news he picked up helped him to look well informed. Thorn had not much imagination, but he was cautious, calculating, and generally saw where his advantage lay. His small estate was managed well, in general his tenants liked him, and his investments were sound. Nevertheless, he was dissatisfied; he had waited long for Grace Osborn, and feared that in spite of her father's approval he got no nearer her.

He had meant to go out, but had no particular object and the streets were hot; besides, after the quiet country, he liked the bustle in the hall. People were beginning to come in and one could see the crowd stream past the glass doors. Sitting down in a corner he began to muse. Although he had been in town some time, he had not seen Gerald. He had called at the latter's lodgings and found him not at home, while when he went to the bank he was told that

Gerald had been sent to manage a small branch office. Thorn thought it strange that Osborn had said nothing about this and wondered whether he knew. Gerald was extravagant and much less frank than he looked ; he might have had an object for hiding his promotion. Thorn understood that Osborn made him some allowance, but it was hard to see how the young man was able to belong to his rather expensive club.

After a time, Gerald came in and glanced at two or three men who stood about. At first, Thorn imagined he was looking for him, but saw he was not. Gerald went into the telephone box close by and shut the door with a jerky movement. It jarred and then swung back a few inches as if the shock had jolted the spring. Thorn, whose curiosity was excited, listened and heard the number Gerald asked for. Then he heard him say :

" Yes—Osborn ! Is that Sanderson ? Yes—I said *Ermentrudes*. Any chance of a recovery ? What—none at all ? Can't hear—oh, sell at once ! Margin's gone."

Next moment Gerald obviously saw that the door was open, for he banged it noisily and Thorn heard nothing more. He had, however, heard enough to give him food for thought and waited until Gerald came out. The young man stood still with his mouth firmly set and his eyes fixed on the wall as if he saw nobody. His clothes were in the latest fashion, but the look of fastidious languidness that generally marked him had gone. Turning abruptly, he went up the stairs, and Thorn entered the telephone box and opened the directory. When he came out he went up to a man he knew.

" Can you tell me anything about Short and Sanderson, stockbrokers ? " he asked.

" Not much," said the other. " They're outside brokers. I imagine they're trustworthy, but it's better to do business through a member of the Exchange. You'll find it a good rule."

" Thank you," said Thorn, who went upstairs to the smoking-room and found Gerald sitting in front of a table, with a newspaper that dealt with financial matters in his hand.

"Hallo!" said Thorn. "I have been expecting you for some days. I suppose you got my message?"

Gerald looked up and his smile was strained. "I did, but have been much engaged. Sit down and join me in a drink."

"What have you ordered?" Thorn asked, and shrugged when Gerald told him.

"That goes better after dinner. I'd sooner have something cool and light."

"Oh, well," said Gerald. "I felt I needed bracing. The fact is, I've had a knock——"

He stopped as a waiter came up and said nothing until the man had gone. Then he drained his glass and turned to Thorn.

"I'm in a hole. Can you lend me two thousand pounds?"

Thorn hid his surprise. He thought urgent need had forced Gerald to make his blunt request; it was not his way to plunge at things like that.

"You asked your father for a smaller sum."

"They told you about my letter? Well, things have changed since; changed for the worse."

"They must have changed rather quickly," Thorn remarked, for his suspicion was excited and he thought he saw a light. Gerald had been embarrassed when he wrote to Osborn, and had not wanted the money to invest but to help him to escape the consequences of some extravagance.

"That has nothing to do with it," Gerald rejoined. "Will you let me have the money? You can if you like."

"To begin with, you had better tell me why you want so large a sum."

Gerald hesitated and his eyelids twitched nervously, but he pulled himself together and Thorn wondered how far he would stick to the truth. He knew Gerald and did not trust him.

"Very well; I bought some shares. There was good ground for expecting they'd go up——"

"They went down? When did you buy?"

"Your meaning's plain," said Gerald sullenly. "If you insist, it was before I wrote home."

"I suspected something like that. However, you have the shares and they may go up again."

"I haven't got the shares. I bought on a margin, and the margin's gone."

"Then, you're rasher than I thought," Thorn rejoined with a searching look. "Well, you have lost your money and it's something of a surprise to hear you had so much. Anyhow, it was yours, and, although the loss is serious, I don't understand how you're embarrassed."

"I borrowed," said Gerald rather hoarsely. "You can wait; the other fellow won't. Then, of course, if I renewed the margin, the shares might recover and put me straight."

Thorn pondered. Gerald's statement was plausible, but he doubted if he had told him all.

"Two thousand pounds is a large sum," he said. "I don't know yet if I can lend it you."

Gerald gave him a steady look. His face was haggard and the sweat ran down his forehead. It was obvious that he was desperate.

"If you hope to marry my sister, you had better help me out."

"I haven't much ground for thinking your sister will agree," Thorn rejoined with some dryness. "Anyhow, it's doubtful if your influence would go far with her, if that is what you mean."

"It is not what I mean," Gerald answered in a hoarse voice. "I have given you a useful hint. You can spare two thousand pounds, and if you let me have the money, you'll be glad you did."

"I must think about it. You can call me up on the telephone at noon to-morrow."

Gerald hesitated, and then made an abrupt movement as a man came into the room. The latter crossed the floor and Gerald got up.

"Very well," he said, and went off.

Soon after Gerald had gone, the man Thorn had met in the hall came in and he asked: "Do you know anything about *Ermentrudes*, Norton? I suppose they're mining shares?"

"I wouldn't advise you to invest," the other replied.

"The company has seldom paid a dividend, but not long since a rumour got about that a new shaft had bottomed on rich ore." He paused and shrugged. "Nobody knows how such tales are started, but they appeal to optimistic outsiders who like to think they've got a secret tip. Anyhow, there was some reckless buying by people who expected developments at the shareholders' meeting. They were disappointed, and are knocking prices down by their anxiety to sell out."

Thorn thanked him and began to think. He wondered where Gerald had imagined to get two thousand pounds, since he imagined that nobody would lend him the sum. He did not know much about banking, but it was possible that Gerald had used his employers' money, hoping to replace it before he was found out. Then, since two thousand pounds, used for a margin, would cover a large number of shares, it looked as if Gerald had lost part of the sum by previous speculations. While he pondered, the man whose entry had seemed to disturb Gerald came to his table and sat down opposite.

"You obviously know young Osborn," he remarked.

Thorn said nothing for a moment or two. Hallam was not a public money-lender, but sometimes negotiated private loans for extravagant young men about town. One meets such people now and then at smart London clubs, and Thorn imagined the fellow could throw some light on Gerald's difficulties.

"We come from the same neighbourhood," he replied.

"His father is a large landowner, I believe?"

"He has some land," said Thorn, who began to see his way. He had not yet decided to help Gerald, but if he did, his help must be made as valuable as possible. "The rents are low and the estate is encumbered," he resumed. "On the whole, I don't think you would consider it good security."

"Thank you for the hint. Osborn looked as if he had got a jar."

"I think he had. He bought some shares that have gone down sharply, and since he's a bank-clerk I expect the loss is a serious thing for him."

Hallam nodded carelessly. "No doubt! Do you know a man called Askew?"

"I know something about him. He owns a farm in the dale and has recently spent some money on improvements, although it's doubtful if he'll get much return. I can't tell you if he has any more or not, but imagine he's not worth your bothering about. Besides, he's not the man I'd expect to get into debt."

"Mr. Askew has not been trying to borrow," Hallam answered with a smile. "Well, I promised to meet a friend and mustn't stop."

He went away and Thorn sat still, pondering. The other men went out by and by and the room got quiet except for the rumble of traffic in the street and the rattle of an electric fan. A waiter pulled down a blind to shut out a bright sunbeam and Thorn found the shade and softened noises from outside helpful to thought.

Gerald had used money belonging to the bank and borrowed from Hallam in order to pay it back; although Thorn could not see what had persuaded the latter to lend. It was strange, certainly, that Hallam had inquired about Askew, but in the meantime he could let this go. Gerald was threatened by a danger money could avert, and Thorn could help. If he did help, it would give him a claim to Osborn's gratitude, although he could not tell how far this would influence Grace.

For a time he sat with his brows knitted and his mouth set. He would have liked to be generous, but he loved the girl and could not force himself to run the risk of losing her. Nevertheless, he honestly tried, and afterwards remembered with strange distinctness the soft rattle of the electric fan and the dull roll of traffic that throbbed in the quiet room while he fought the losing fight. The sunbeam the waiter had shut out crept on to another window and shone on the fluted pillars before he got up. His face was very hard, for he had chosen his line and knew he must take it without doubt or pity.

Going down to the hall, he called up Gerald's branch bank. A clerk who was working late replied that Mr. Osborn had gone.

"I know," said Thorn, giving his name. "Make a note to tell him he need not call on me to-morrow. I find I am unable to do what he requires."

"Very well," said the clerk. "I'll give him the message in the morning."

Thorn rang the bell and, leaving the box, asked for a railway guide. There was nothing to be gained by stopping in London and he looked up the best train for the north.

CHAPTER VII

GERALD'S RETURN

THORN went home and waited, confident that Osborn would presently send for him. The estate was heavily mortgaged, Osborn had no rich friends, and when the blow fell would look to Thorn for the aid nobody else could give. Osborn, enjoying a short relief from financial strain, squandered in personal extravagance part of the sum he had borrowed, and then set drainers, carpenters, and builders to work. He liked spending and now tried to persuade himself that the money he was laying out would give him some return. It ought to last until he had finished the renovations his tenants demanded, and although difficulties might arise afterwards, he would wait until they did. Indeed, his wife and daughter found him better humoured than he had been for long.

Then, one evening when the hay was harvested and the corn was ripening, his satisfaction was rudely banished. Grace had gone to the lodge with a message and stopped for a few minutes by the gate. The evening was calm and one side of the placid tarn glittered in the light; the other was dark, and soft blue shadow covered the fells behind. She heard the languid splash of ripples on the stones and the murmur of a beck in a distant ghyll. A strange restful tranquillity brooded over the dale.

Grace felt the calm soothing, for her thoughts were not

a little disturbed. She had met Thorn in the afternoon and noted a puzzling change in his manner. So far, she had been able to check his cautious advances, but she now remarked a new confidence that seemed to indicate he had some power in reserve. She admitted that she might have imagined this, but it troubled her.

Afterwards she had met Kit and the comfort the meeting gave her had forced her to think. Their friendship had gone far; in fact, it had reached a point friendship could not pass. Kit was not yet her lover, but she thought he waited for a sign that she would acknowledge him when he made his claim.

But, if she married Kit, she must quarrel with her parents. She knew what Osborn thought about him. Had she been sure she loved Kit, the choice would have been easier, but although she blushed as she mused, this was too much to own. Yet he oved her, and after all——

She let the matter go and looked up, for there were steps in the shadowy road. Then a figure came into the fading light, and she started and ran to the gate.

"Gerald!" she exclaimed. "Why have you come home?"

"Somehow you don't feel flattered when people ask you why you came," Gerald rejoined with a forced smile. "It rather indicates surprise than satisfaction."

"I am surprised," Grace admitted, trying to hide her vague alarm. "We did not expect you. How did you get away?"

"I took a week's leave. I haven't been very fit."

Grace gave him a sharp glance and thought he looked ill. His face was pinched, his eyes were furtive, and his mouth was slack.

"What has been the matter?" she asked.

"Nothing very much," Gerald replied. "Mental strain, I expect. Managing a bank is a big job and I'm not used to responsibility."

It looked as if his carelessness cost him an effort and Grace said nothing. When they reached the house Gerald resumed: "You'll hear all about it later. Is the chief at home?"

Grace nodded. They had seldom called Osborn father, but chief and head of the clan, and she thought it significant that Gerald used the name he often falteringly employed after boyish escapades. She began to feel that there was something wrong.

"He's in the library," she said.

"That's satisfactory, as far as it goes," Gerald remarked, climbing the steps. "The sooner I see him, the sooner I'll get through the thing." He paused and gave Grace an anxious glance. "You'll stand by me? You generally did."

"I suppose so," Grace agreed. "But I don't know your difficulties and what you want."

"You will know soon," Gerald rejoined and shrugged his shoulders. "Well, it's an awkward business; I've got to brace up."

He left her and went to the library, where Osborn sat at the big oak table with some letters and a wine glass in front of him.

"Well?" he said harshly. "Why have you left the bank?"

"The wine is running across the table and on to your clothes. Shall I ring?"

"No," said Osborn, pushing his chair back noisily. "Let it run! Stand still or sit down. Tell me why you came."

"To begin with, I have left the bank for good."

"Ah," said Osborn grimly, "I suspected something like this! You mean they turned you out? Well, you are consistent in your habits. You left school in similar circumstances, you left Woolwich, and now——"

"I was not turned out, sir. They gave me a week's leave, but I can't go back."

Osborn frowned. Things had been going well and he had thought himself free from trouble for a time, but it looked as if he would get his worst jar. He tried to preserve his calm and said with a touch of weariness:

"Tell me what has happened and keep as near the truth as is possible for you."

Gerald told him, standing back in the shadow and not

pausing to choose his words. It was an ugly story that could not be toned down and he knew if he stopped he could not go on again. Although Osborn said nothing, his face got red and the veins on his forehead swelled, and Gerald found his silence strangely daunting. When the latter stopped, Osborn got up and stood, rather shakily, with his hand clenched.

"Get out of my sight, you despicable thief!" he cried. "My control is going. If you stop and fidget there, I'll knock you down!"

"There wouldn't be much use in that, although I deserve it," Gerald replied. "It's too late for excuses. The situation's dangerous. You have got to help me out."

"I can't help" said Osborn in a strained, hoarse voice. "Why didn't you leave the country instead of coming home?"

Gerald forced a nervous smile. "The reason ought to be obvious, sir; I might be brought back. We must get over the need for me to go. You see, the bill must be met. If it's dishonoured, everybody who knows us will have something to talk about."

"I thought you a fool," said Osborn bitterly. "You are a fool, but you have a vein of devilish cunning. You steal and forge; and then expect to shuffle off the consequences on to your relatives!"

He pulled himself up, for Gerald's coolness was steadying. "However, I must understand. What will happen when the lender finds you cannot pay?"

"The usual course would be for him to go to the endorser," Gerald replied and added with some awkwardness: "I mean the man whose name I used. His signature's a guarantee and makes him liable. Still, as Hallam's a tactful fellow, it's possible he'll first come to you."

"Do you mean he's suspicious?"

"I don't know. He took off an extortionate discount for a very short loan."

"How much did he lend you?"

"The bill was for two thousand pounds."

Osborn made a helpless gesture. "I can't pay. The money I borrowed is partly spent and the rest must go

for wages and material. You can't put wages off——"

He stopped and sat down limply. The shock was beginning to tell. He felt dull and had no reserve of moral strength to sustain him now his fury had gone. Gerald saw this and knew that guidance must come from him. He waited, however, and Osborn went on :

" It's ridiculous that we should be ruined for two thousand pounds ; but there it is ! If I try to borrow from my friends, I must tell why I need the money. And I don't know who would lend."

" Thorn might," Gerald suggested meaningly. " I asked him and he wouldn't, but I don't think his refusal was final."

" Ah ! " said Osborn, with a start. " Why do you think it was not ? "

" I imagine he has another plan ; he means to wait until it's obvious we must have his help. Then he can ask what he likes."

For a moment, Osborn's anger blazed up again. " I see where you are leading, you contemptible cur ! You expect your sister to pay for you ! "

" It would be a good marriage," said Gerald awkwardly. " I thought you wanted it."

" Stop ! " exclaimed Osborn, and rested his elbows on the table, with his shoulders bent.

For a minute or two, he did not move and Gerald got horribly cramped as he stood opposite. The room was getting dark and Osborn's figure was indistinct, but his quietness hinted at a struggle. Gerald began to feel anxious, because he had not expected his father to hesitate. At length Osborn looked up.

" You haven't told me whose name you used."

" Askew's," said Gerald, with a tremor. He knew he could use no stronger argument, but felt afraid.

" Askew's ! " shouted Osborn, straightening his bent shoulders with a savage jerk. " This is more than I can bear. Was there nobody you could rob but the man who has plotted against me since he came home from school ? " He stopped and gasped as if his rage were choking him and it was some moments before he went on : " You have given

the fellow power to humble us and drag our name in the mud. Can't you imagine how he'll exult? Our honour in Askew's hands! It's unthinkable!"

"If the bill isn't met, the holder will apply to Askew," Gerald said as coolly as he could.

Osborn's muscles relaxed and he sank back into his limp pose. His hands shook as he wiped his wet forehead.

"You have said enough. Leave me alone. I must try to think."

Gerald went out and drew a deep breath when he reached the landing. He felt shaky and ashamed, but knew he had won. The shutting of the door gave Osborn some relief. The anger and disgust Gerald excited had confused his brain, but now the lad had gone he saw no light. There was but one way of escape, and this a way it was almost unthinkable that he should take. The strange thing was he should hate it so much, for he had never indulged his children or thought about their happiness. Yet he shrank from forcing his daughter to marry Thorn whom he approved while she did not.

He might, perhaps, for the girl's sake, have sacrificed his pride; but there was an obstacle before which his courage melted. If Thorn did not help, Askew would know his disgrace and Osborn did not expect him to be merciful. His rancour against Askew had by degrees become a blind, illogical hate that made it impossible for him to see anything Kit did in its proper light. Feeling as he did, he imagined Kit would rejoice in the opportunity for humbling him.

All the same, knowing the fight was hopeless, he struggled against the conviction that he must beg help from Thorn. In many ways, he liked Alan, but he was hard and Osborn dreaded his firmness now. Yet he could help and there was nobody else. It got dark, but Osborn did not move. A faint breeze got up and moaned about the house, and presently a moonbeam stole into the room. Osborn sat still, with his head bent and his arms spread out across the table. Sometimes he burned with anger against Gerald and sometimes he scarcely felt anything at all.

At length he got up, and went upstairs.

CHAPTER VIII

GRACE'S CONFIDENCE

ON the day after Gerald's return Osborn shut himself up in his library. If he could raise two thousand pounds it would save him from agreeing to the demand Thorn would, no doubt, make, and although he really knew the thing was impossible, he sought desperately for a way of escape. He was careless about money, and, for the most part, left his business to his agent, but he wanted to find out how he stood before he went to Hayes. There was no obvious reason for his doing so, but he had begun to suspect that Hayes was not as devoted to his interests as he had thought. His wife and Grace distrusted the fellow, and although they knew nothing about business, Osborn admitted that the advice they had sometimes given him had been sound.

The involved calculations he made gave him fresh ground for disturbance. It was plain that he could borrow no more money and the sum he had received for the last mortgage had nearly gone. He might perhaps get together three or four hundred pounds, at the risk of letting builders and drainers go unpaid, but this was not enough. After a time, he put away his books in a fit of hopeless anger and drove across to see Hayes at the market town.

The interview was short and disappointing. Osborn could not tell Hayes why he needed money and found him unusually firm. He proved that the estate was heavily overburdened, fresh loans were impossible, and stern economy must be used if it was to be saved from bankruptcy. He drove home in a downcast mood and sent for Gerald.

"I can't get the money," he said. "You know the man you dealt with. Is there any hope of his renewing the bill?"

"I'm afraid there is none, sir," Gerald replied.

"When he made the loan he knew you were a bank-clerk and had no money."

"I expect he did know, but thought you had some."

Osborn sighed. His anger had gone and a dull, hopeless

dejection had taken its place. He felt as if he and Gerald were accomplices in a plot against Grace, and did not resent the lad's insinuation that they stood together. The Osborns did stand together, and he hoped Grace would see her duty.

"Well," he said, "the payment is not due just yet. I'll wait a little and then write to the fellow."

It was a relief to put the thing off, but he found no comfort as the days went by, and although he shrank from taking Mrs. Osborn into his confidence, his moody humour gave her a hint. Besides, he was not clever at keeping a secret and now and then made illuminating remarks. Mrs. Osborn, although reserved, was shrewd, and she and Grace, without consulting each other, speculated about the trouble that obviously threatened the house. By degrees, their conjectures got near the truth, and at length Mrs. Osborn nerved herself to ask her husband a few blunt questions. He had not meant to tell her all until he was forced, but was taken off his guard and told her much. Afterwards she sent for Grace.

When Grace heard the story her face got very white and she looked at her mother with fear in her eyes.

"I suspected something, but this is worse than I thought," she said in a low strained voice. "But Alan is an old friend; it is not very much for him to do and perhaps he will be generous."

Mrs. Osborn was sitting rather limply on the stone bench on the terrace, but she roused herself.

"He is hard and I think will understand what his help is worth. He knows there is nobody else. Besides, if we accept this favour, we cannot refuse——"

"Oh," said Grace, "it's unbearable! I never liked Alan; I feel I hate him now." She paused and gave Mrs. Osborn an appealing glance. "But you cannot think I ought to agree, mother? There must be another way!"

Mrs. Osborn shook her head. "I cannot see another way, and many girls in our class have married men they did not like, though I had hoped for a better lot for you. With us, women do not count; the interests of the family come first."

"That means the men's interests," Grace broke out.

"Father has been reckless all his life and now Gerald has dragged our name in the mud. He is to be saved from the consequences and I must pay!"

"It is unjust," Mrs. Osborn agreed. "So far as that goes, there is no more to be said. But when one thinks of the disgrace—Gerald hiding in America, or perhaps in prison!"

Her voice broke. She was silent for a few moments and then resumed: "Your father's is the conventional point of view that I was taught to accept but which I begin to doubt. I must choose betwen my daughter and my son; the son who carries on the house. If Gerald escapes, his punishment falls on you. The choice is almost too hard for flesh and blood."

"I know," said Grace, with quick sympathy. "It is horrible!"

"Well," said Mrs. Osborn, "the line I ought to take is plain—Tarnside will be Gerald's; our honour must be saved. But I do not know. If you shrink from Alan——"

"If he insists, I shall hate him always. Yet, it looks as if there was no use in rebelling. I feel as if I had been caught in a snare that tightens when I try to break loose. I understand why a rabbit screams and struggles until it chokes when it feels the wire. It's like that with me."

Mrs. Osborn bent her head. "My dear! My dear!" Then she looked up irresolutely with tears in her eyes. "I cannot see my duty as I thought. The convention is that my son should come first, but you are nearer to me than Gerald has been for long. I feel numb and dull; I cannot think. Perhaps to-morrow I may see——"

Grace got up and kissed her. "Then, we will wait. If no help comes, I suppose I must submit."

Grace afterwards looked back with horror on the disturbed evening and sleepless night, and the morning brought her no relief. She could not resign herself to the sacrifice she thought she would be forced to make, and her mother told her that Osborn had sent a note to Thorn and a man from London would arrive in the evening. It was plain that Alan must be persuaded to help Gerald before the other came.

In the afternoon she walked up the dale, without an object, because it was impossible to stop in the house. After a time she heard a dog bark and, stopping by an open gate, saw Kit swinging a scythe where an old thorn hedge threw its shadow on a field of corn. He was cutting a path for the binder and for a minute or two she stood and watched.

Then his dog ran up and Kit, putting down his scythe, came to the gate. He gave her a searching glance, but she was calm again and began to talk about the harvest. He did not seem to listen, and when she stopped said abruptly : " You are standing in the sun. Come into the shade ; I'll make you a seat."

She went with him, knowing this was imprudent but unable to resist, and he threw an oat-stook against the bank and covered it with his coat. Grace sat down and he studied her thoughtfully.

" I want you to tell me what's the matter," he said.

" How do you know I have anything to tell ? "

" Perhaps it's sympathy, instinct, or something like that. Anyhow, I do know, and you may feel better when you have told me. It's now and then a relief to talk about one's troubles."

Grace was silent. Her heart beat fast and she longed for his sympathy, and his nearness gave her a feeling of support ; but she could not tell him all her trouble. He waited with a patience that somehow indicated understanding, and she looked about. The tall oats rippled before the wind and soft shadows trailed across the hillside. When the white clouds passed, the dale was filled with light that jarred her hopelessness.

" As you haven't begun yet, I'll make a guess," said Kit. " Things have been going wrong at Tarnside since Gerald came home ? Well, if you can give me a few particulars, it's possible I can help."

His steady glance was comforting and Grace's reserve gave way. It was humiliating, and in a sense disloyal, to talk about Gerald, but her pride had gone and she was suddenly inspired by a strange confidence. Perhaps Kit could help ; one could trust him and he was not the man to be daunted by obstacles.

"Yes," she said vaguely; "it's Gerald——"

"So I thought," Kit remarked. "Very well. You had better tell me all you know, or, anyhow, all you can."

She gave him a quick glance to see what he meant, but his brown face was inscrutable, and with an effort, talking fast in order to finish before her courage failed, she narrated what she had heard. She could not, of course, tell him all, and, indeed, Mrs. Osborn's story left much to be explained.

"Ah," said Kit, "I begin to see a light, although the thing's not quite plain yet. Anyhow, your father needs money and must ask his friends." He paused and resumed in a voice he tried to make careless: "Has he asked Thorn?"

Grace hesitated and turned her head as she felt the blood creep into her face. "Yes; you see, there is nobody else."

"I'm not sure about that. However, it looks as if Thorn had not sent his answer yet and there's not much time to lose. You expect the man from London to-night?"

Grace said they did and studied Kit while he pondered. His preoccupied look indicated that he was working out some plan and did not understand how bold she had been. He did not seem at all surprised that she had come to him. She had broken the family traditions by giving him her confidence, but she felt happier.

"I'd like to see Gerald," he said. "It's important, and I'll be at Ashness at four o'clock. If he will not come, you must let me know."

"I'll send him if I can," said Grace, who got up. Then she hesitated and looked away across the field. "Perhaps I ought not to have told you, but I felt I must, and I'm glad I did."

Kit smiled and after walking to the gate with her went on with his mowing. Her story left out much he wanted to know, but he thought he saw where it led and would get the rest from Gerald. This might be difficult, but he meant to insist.

When Grace reached Tarnside she met Gerald on the lawn and took him to the bench under the copper-beech.

"Mr. Askew wants you to go to Ashness at four o'clock," she said.

"Askew wants me!" Gerald exclaimed, with a start, and Grace thought he looked afraid. "Why?"

"I don't know. He said it was important."

Gerald looked hard at her. "Well, I suppose it is important. But how does he know about the thing?"

"I told him," Grace answered with forced quietness.

"You told him?" Gerald gasped, and then laughed harshly. "I knew you had pluck, but didn't expect this! You don't seem to realise what an extravagant thing you've done."

"I don't; it doesn't matter. Will you go?"

Gerald pondered for a few moments and then looked up. "You owe me nothing, Grace. In fact, you and mother have often had to pay for my folly; but I want you to be honest now. I imagine you understand what Alan expects if he helps me out?"

"Yes," said Grace in a strange hard voice.

"It would be a good marriage; the kind of marriage you ought to make. Alan's rich and can give you the things you like and ought to have. But with all that, I imagine you'd sooner let it go?"

"I hate it," Grace said quietly. "I don't like Alan; I never shall like him."

"He has some drawbacks," Gerald remarked, and was silent. He had not often a generous impulse, but he was moved by his sister's distress and thought he saw a plan. The plan was extravagant, and risky for him.

"I wonder whether you'd sooner marry Askew?" he resumed.

Grace moved abruptly and her face got red. She had not expected the question and was highly strung. Gerald saw her embarrassment and went on:—

"Of course, he's an outsider, from our point of view, but he's a good sort. In fact, he's much better than Alan. Besides, there's some ground for believing you are pretty good friends."

"Stop!" Grace exclaimed. "This has nothing to do with you. It's unthinkable that you should meddle!"

Gerald smiled. "I'm not going to give Askew a hint, if that is what you mean. I wanted to find out if you'd

shrink from him as you shrink from Alan, and I think I know."

"You don't know," Grace declared, and then stopped and blushed as she met his steady look. After all, there was no use in pretending; Gerald would not be deceived. Still, when he quietly got up she asked with alarm: "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to Ashness," Gerald replied. "I've made things hard for you and mother, but I won't bring you fresh embarrassment now. In fact, I think you can trust me, and, indeed, it's obvious that you must." He turned and looked back with a smile. "If Askew's the man I think, the chief will shortly get a jar."

Grace wanted to call him back, but somehow could not, and sat still while he crossed the lawn. So long as she could see him, he moved carelessly, but when he went down the drive behind a clipped hedge his step got slow and his face was hard. The thing he meant to do would need some pluck, and might be dangerous, if he had not judged Askew right.

Kit had gone back to Ashness, and smoked a cigarette while he pondered what Grace had told him. He had seen that she did not altogether know her brother's offence, but since money was needed, Kit could guess; Gerald had been betting or speculating and had used money that was not his. Undoubtedly, Kit did not think he had robbed his employers, because, if he had done so, he would not have stopped at Tarnside. He had, however, robbed somebody, and as Kit remembered his skill with the pen he saw a light. Gerald had used somebody else's name, on the back of a bill or promissory note, and now the bill must be met.

Presently, he heard steps in the passage and looking up as Gerald came in indicated a chair. Gerald sat down and for a few moments Kit studied him quietly. It was obvious that he felt some strain, but his look was resolute and Kit owned that he had more pluck than he had thought. The room was very quiet and the shadow of a big ash-tree fell across the open window. The musical tinkle of a binder working among the corn came faintly down the dale.

"Well?" said Gerald. "You sent for me."

"I did. Your sister told me something; all she knew, perhaps, but not enough. Anyhow, you are in trouble about money and I promised to help."

"For my sake?" Gerald asked.

Kit frowned. "Not altogether, but we'll let that go. If I am to be of use, you had better state the trouble plainly. I must know how things are."

"I suppose, if you find the money I need, it will give you a claim on us," Gerald remarked meaningly.

"Yes," said Kit, with a steady look. "But that won't make any difference. I don't mean to urge my claim. I expect this clears the ground?"

"It does; it's some relief. As a matter of fact, nobody can help quite as much as you."

"Ah," said Kit, "I think I see! You used *my* name. What was the sum for which you made me responsible?"

Gerald told him and waited anxiously when Kit knitted his brows. The sum was not so large as the latter had thought and Osborn's inability to raise it indicated that he was seriously embarrassed.

"I understand your father applied to Thorn," said Kit. "Does he know you have come to me?"

"He does not; nobody knows but Grace. I'd better state that I did come because I thought you'd take a generous line and I'm doubtful about Thorn."

Kit made a sign of understanding. "Thorn hasn't arrived yet?" he said.

"He sent a note he'd come across, but when I left he hadn't arrived. My notion is he's waiting until the last moment, with the object of making us realise we must have his help."

"It's possible," said Kit, who approved Gerald's handling of the matter. The lad was a wastrel, but he had run some risk in order to save his sister from being forced to pay for his fault. "We won't bother about Thorn's object," he resumed. "Tell me about your difficulties. I don't want a half-confidence."

Gerald hesitated and then began his tale. He had used the bank's money to speculate with and had lost. Plunging again, in the hope of getting straight, he had got alarmed

when the margin shrank, and had gone to Hallam, the money-lender. The latter had insisted on a guarantee for the bill and Gerald had used Kit's name. He replaced the bank's money and had hoped the shares would go up before the bill fell due, but they had not.

"Well," said Kit quietly. "I expected something like this, and when the fellow brings the bill to your father it must be met." He stopped, and, picking up a newspaper studied the steamship advertisements. Then he turned to Gerald.

"There's another thing. You can't get a post in England, and for your mother's and sister's sakes, had better leave the country. A fast New York boat sails from Liverpool to-morrow. You must get off by to-night's train."

Gerald looked at him with surprise. "But I'm not going to New York. I've no money and don't know what to do when I get there."

"I'll fix that," Kit said dryly. "You are going, anyhow. If you deliver the letter I'll give you to some people in Mobile, they'll find you a job. The rest will depend upon yourself."

For a few moments Gerald hesitated, and then got up. "Very well! Perhaps it's the best chance I'll get, and I'll take it. But I must go back and pack the clothes I'll want."

"I think not," said Kit. "There's not much time. I must see the bank manager at his house first of all, and start soon. You'll come with me to the town. Sit down and write to your mother; I'll see she gets the note."

Gerald did as he was told and not long afterwards Kit and he drove out of the Ashness lonning and took the road to the town.

CHAPTER IX

KIT GOES TO THE RESCUE

GRACE stood at the lodge gate, watching the road to Ashness while the shadows crept across the dale. Gerald had not come back and she had not told her mother where he had gone. The delay was worrying, particularly since Kit had sent no message. He had said he could help and one could trust him, but he did not come and the confidence she had felt was vanishing. If it was not well placed, there was no escape for her, and she shrank with horror from meeting Thorn's demand.

The shadows got longer, but nothing moved on the road that ran like a white riband across the fields until it vanished among the trees at Ashness. Presently, however, she heard the throb of a car coming up the valley and a cloud of dust rolled up behind a hedge. It was Thorn's car; she knew its hum and as she watched the dust get nearer her face went white. Then, as the hum became loud and menacing, she clenched her hand and ran in nervous panic up the drive. She was breathless when she reached the house, but pulled herself together and went to a quiet room where she would be alone.

Osborn, sitting in the library, heard the car, and got up with a sense of relief and shrinking. He had been afraid that Thorn would fail him, and now he almost wished that the fellow had not come. He was not in the mood to be logical, and although it was obvious that Thorn alone could save him from disaster, knowing what Grace must pay hurt more than he had thought. Yet she must pay; he could find no other plan. Now he was acquiescent but not resigned, and his hopelessness gave him calm.

Thorn's face was hot when he came in, and he glanced at Osborn with an effort for carelessness when the latter indicated a chair. Osborn looked old and broken, but he had a touch of dignity that was new.

"I'm sorry if I'm late," Thorn remarked. "I had to go to Swinset and had trouble with the car."

Osborn wondered dully whether this was the real ground for his delay, but he said, "Oh, well, it does not matter now you have arrived. I gave you a hint about my object in sending for you, but you don't know all yet."

"I imagine I know enough. Gerald's in trouble; he or you must meet the bill Hallam will bring. You see, the fellow belongs to my club and I had a talk with him when I was in town."

"So you knew what threatened us?" Osborn remarked, rather sharply. "If so, it's curious you waited until I sent for you."

Thorn hesitated. He had meant to be tactful, but it looked as if he had been rash. Osborn's suspicions were obviously excited.

"The matter is delicate, and I knew you would send for me if you thought I could be of use."

"You can be of use. Unless I take up the fellow's bill, Gerald will go to gaol."

Thorn made a sign of sympathy. He was surprised by Osborn's bluntness, which implied that the latter was desperate. "That must be prevented. I'll give you a cheque."

He took out his cheque book, and then stopped, and Osborn asked: "Is this a free loan, Alan? I mean, is it made without conditions?"

"A gift, if you like. Anyhow, I won't bother you about repayment. We can't talk about *conditions*; but I have something to ask."

"Grace?" said Osborn, rather hoarsely.

"Yes," said Thorn, with a hint of embarrassment. "I want Grace. It's an awkward situation. I don't want to urge that I deserve my reward, but I've waited a long time and thought you approved."

"I did approve. I hoped she'd marry you, but I imagined she could be persuaded and would do so willingly. However, it looks as if I was mistaken."

Thorn leaned forward, fixing his eyes on Osborn.

"Grace is young, and perhaps I don't make a strong appeal to her romantic feelings, but I belong to her rank and her views and tastes are mine. That is much. Also,

I can indulge and give her all she likes ; the refinements and comforts to which she is, in a sense, entitled. After all, they count for something. I'm trying to be practical, but I love her."

" If you really love her, I think you would do well not to urge her just now," Osborn remarked quietly.

" Ah," said Thorn, " I can't wait. Waiting has gained me nothing and there is a risk. If I were young, I'd use all the patience I could control, but I'm getting old and farther away from Grace. In another year or two I shall be bald and fat. Perhaps the argument's humorous, but it has a cruel force for me."

" There are other girls, brought up as we have brought up Grace. They might be flattered——"

Thorn spread out his hands. " You don't understand. I'm not looking for a wife ! I love her, and if she cannot be persuaded, will never marry anybody else." He paused and resumed with some emotion : " I know the shabbiness of using this opportunity ; but it's the last I'll get. I don't want to work on her gratitude, but I see no other plan. I would like to be generous—but I can't let her go."

" Yet you seem to realise that she does not like you."

" She will get over that. Her likes and dislikes haven't yet hardened into their final mould. She's impulsive and generous ; I can win her by patience and kindness."

" It is a rash experiment. If you are disappointed, Grace would have to pay."

Thorn was silent for a few moments. He had talked with sincere passion, but now began to think. Osborn's firmness was something of a surprise ; Thorn had not expected he would weigh his daughter's feelings against the danger that threatened his house. His opposition must be broken down.

" I had hoped for your consent," he said and his face got hard. " To some extent, I took it for granted."

Osborn's head sunk forward. He had struggled, but saw that he was beaten. To beg would be useless and he could not fight. Pulling himself together with an effort, he looked up.

" You mean you knew I could not refuse ? "

"Yes," said Thorn awkwardly, "I suppose I do mean something like that."

Osborn gave him a long, steady look. Thorn's face was set and his mouth was firm. There was no hint of yielding and Osborn got up. "Very well; I must tell my wife."

He rang a bell and a minute or two afterwards Mrs. Osborn came in. She sat down and Osborn stood opposite.

"Alan has done us the honour of asking my consent to his marrying Grace," he said, with ironical formality. "If we approve, he is willing to help Gerald." He turned to Thorn. "I think I have stated your terms?"

Thorn coloured as he saw that Mrs. Osborn's eyes were fixed on him. "You exaggerate. I am willing to do you a service that nobody else can render and I think I'm justified in counting on your gratitude."

"Very well," said Osborn. "I don't see much difference except that you want to save our pride." He paused and looked at his wife. "You know Grace best. Will she consent?"

Something in his manner moved Mrs Osborn. It was long since he had asked what she thought, and she felt encouraged. Beside, now the crisis had come her irresolution had vanished. She had thrown off her reserve and meant to defend her daughter.

"No," she said, with a determined note in her quiet voice. "Even if she were willing, I should protest. The fault is Gerald's and he must suffer."

Osborn felt some surprise, but his humiliation had made him gentle, "Gerald cannot suffer alone. His disgrace will reflect upon us all and if he has a son it will follow him. We have been reckless and extravagant, but we have kept our good name and now, when it is all that is left us, it must be protected."

"That was Gerald's duty," Mrs. Osborn rejoined and was silent for a few moments. To some extent, her husband's point of view was hers and she knew his finest quality was his exaggerated family pride. But she would not force her daughter to marry Thorn.

"I will not consent," she resumed. "Grace has long suffered for her brother's extravagance, but she shall not

pay for his folly now. It is unjust ; the price is too high ! " Then she gave Thorn an appealing glance. " Alan, can you not be generous ? "

" I'm not brave enough ; it might cost me too much," Thorn answered in a strained voice. " I cannot let Grace go. She would be happy with me after a time."

Mrs. Osborn made a scornful gesture and there was silence. Osborn moved irresolutely and it looked as if he were hesitating ; then steps echoed along the landing and he started as Kit came in. Thorn's face got very dark, but Mrs. Osborn looked up with a strange sense of relief.

" I didn't stop to ask if you were at home," Kit remarked. " As you know, time is getting short. I understand a man from London will bring you a document about a loan."

" That is so," said Osborn hoarsely. " What are you going to do about the document ? "

" Take it up," Kit answered, with a look of surprise. " My name's on the back." He paused and glanced at Thorn. " Still, this is a matter I'd sooner talk about with you alone."

Thorn got up, making an effort for self-control.

" Since Mr. Askew has arrived I needn't stop." He bowed to Mrs. Osborn. " It looks as if I had not understood things. You won't need my help."

He went out with a curious heavy step, and when the door shut Osborn sat down and looked at Kit as if he had got a shock

" Then you haven't come to humble me ? "

" Certainly not," said Kit. " I should have come before, but had to find my bank manager, who had left his office."

" Where is Gerald ? What have you done with him ? " Mrs. Osborn asked, for she began to see a light.

" Gerald's at the station hotel, waiting for the train to Liverpool. He sails for New York to-morrow and takes a letter to some friends of mine who will give him a good start. He sent a note."

Mrs. Osborn read the note and her eyes shone as she turned them on Kit. " It is perhaps the best plan. I would have liked to see him ; but I thank you."

"What I have done cost me nothing, and I imagine Gerald will have as good a chance of making progress as he had at the bank, while the excitement he'll probably get will suit him better. But Hallam will be here soon if the train is punctual, and before he comes I want to know——"

At this moment they heard a car come up the drive, a servant knocked at the door, and Hallam was shown in. He sat down in front of the table where Osborn told him, and glanced at Kit.

"This is Mr. Askew," Osborn said. "Mrs. Osborn will stop; she knows your business."

Hallam bowed and tried not to look surprised.

"Very well. I have brought the document about which you wrote. I am sorry I find it impossible to renew the loan."

"Let me see the bill," said Kit, who took it from him and afterwards nodded. "Yes; that's all right! Cancel the thing and I'll give you a cheque."

"You admit your liability, then?" Hallam asked.

"Of course! What did you expect? My name's here. It's not my habit to disown my debts."

Hallam did not state what he had expected. He was tactful and was satisfied to get his money. Pulling out a fountain pen, he cancelled the bill and put Kit's cheque in his pocket.

"That is all, I think, and I can get a train if I start at once," he said. "If you should require help to extend your farm or improve your stock, I should be glad if you would apply to me."

"I'm afraid your interest is too high," Kit rejoined with a smile, and Hallam bowed to the others and went out.

When he had gone, Osborn turned to Kit, who gave Mrs. Osborn the cancelled bill.

"I don't understand," he said dully. "Why have you come to my rescue?"

"To some extent, it was for Miss Osborn's sake."

"Ah!" said Osborn. "I suppose you have a demand to make now I am in your power?"

"You are not in my power. Mrs. Osborn has the bill and if you cannot repay me, I won't urge the debt. But

there is, so to speak, a stipulation. You must use no pressure to persuade Miss Osborn to marry Mr. Thorn."

"I am not likely to do so," Osborn remarked dryly. He paused and his face got red as he struggled with his deep-rooted dislike for Kit.

"You have taken a very generous line, Mr. Askew," he resumed. "We have not been friends, but I must confess it looks as if I had been unjust."

Kit smiled. "Luck made us antagonists. However, I hope the antagonism has gone for good, because after all I have something to ask. I must go to London on some business to-morrow, but with your leave I will again call in a week."

"You will find us at home when you do come," Osborn answered with grave politeness, and when Kit got up Mrs. Osborn gave him her hand.

He went out and Osborn, who felt limp now the strain had slackened, leaned back heavily in the chair and looked at his wife.

"The fellow is a working farmer, but he struck just the right note. Well, he has beaten me, and it's easier to be beaten by him than I thought. But he states he's coming back——"

"Yes," said Mrs. Osborn. "I think he means to ask for Grace."

"I imagined that was done with," Osborne declared. "It is one thing to take his help and another to give him Grace. After all there is not much difference between his plan and Thorn's."

"I expect you will find the difference important," Mrs. Osborn replied with a smile. "He has broken down your unjustified prejudice, and if he is the man I think he will leave Grace free to refuse—if she likes."

Then she went out, for the strain had been hard to bear, and Osborn sat at the table with his hand tightly closed. He admitted that he had from the beginning been wrong about Kit, but his prejudices were not altogether banished yet.

CHAPTER X

GRACE'S CHOICE

A WEEK after Hallam's visit, Kit one afternoon started for Tarnside. He had been forced to go to London about some American business, but this was a relief, since it gave him an excuse for delay. At his interview with Osborn he had left the most important thing unsaid, because it might have jarred Mrs. Osborn whom he thought his friend, had he asked for Grace at the moment he had put her father in his debt.

In fact he saw it would be tactful if he had waited for some time, but he did not mean to do so. To some extent he distrusted Osborn and resolved to make his request before the latter's gratitude began to cool. Grace must have full liberty to refuse, but he did not owe her father much.

He wondered how she would choose and his step got slower until he stopped and, sitting on a broken wall, looked up the valley. The day was calm and the sun shone on smooth pasture and yellow corn. The becks had shrunk in the shady ghylls and a thin white line was all that marked the fall where the main stream leaped down the Force Crag. On the steep slopes the heather made purple patches among the bent-grass and Malton moor shone red. Kit loved the quiet hills ; he had known intrigue and adventure and now saw his work waiting in his native dale. The soil called him ; his job was to extend the plough-land and improve his flocks.

This was important, because he could not tell how far Grace would sympathise. Her father liked the leading place ; an effort for display and such luxury as could be cheaply got were the rule at Tarnside. It was possible that Grace had unconsciously accepted a false standard of values. She must have inherited something of Osborn's tastes and to copy the Tarnside customs might encourage their

development. It was better to remove her from insidious influences to fresh surroundings where she would, so to speak, breathe a bracing air. But this could not be done unlesss she were willing to go.

There was not much to indicate whether he would find Grace willing or not. She liked him well enough, but he had not ventured to pose as her lover. He was too proud and jealous for her; knowing what Osborn thought, he would not involve her in a secret intrigue. Yet she had been kind and he had now and then got a hint of an elusive tenderness. Moreover, in her distress, she had come to him. She was proud and he thought would not have asked his help unless she was willing to give something in return.

After a time he got up with quick, resolute movement. He would soon know if he had set his hopes too high, and would gain nothing by indulging his doubts. Crossing a field where the binders were at work, he went up the Tarnside drive with a firm step and saw Osborn and Mrs. Osborn sitting under the copper-beech. It looked as if they were waiting for him, and he braced himself as he advanced. Mrs. Osborn smiled as she gave him her hand and Osborn indicated a box of cigarettes.

"Sit down. Mrs. Osborn will give you some tea presently," he said, with an effort for hospitable politeness, because he could not yet resign himself to the demand his wife expected Kit would make. "You have been to town on business," he resumed, feeling that silence would be awkward. "I hope you found things satisfactory."

"I did," said Kit, who was glad that Osborn had, no doubt unconsciously, given him a lead. He had gone to visit the agents of his American bankers, and had learned that Adam's estate had turned out to be worth more than he had thought.

"It was a relief, because it helps me to get over some of the hesitation I felt," he resumed. "I want your permission to ask Miss Osborn if she will marry me."

Osborn tried to hide his disturbed feelings and answered with forced quietness: "My wife warned me that I might expect something like this, but I must own that I find agreement hard. However, after the help you have given

us, it is plain that I must try to overcome my reluctance."

"That is all I ask in the meantime," said Kit. "I don't expect you to influence Miss Osborn. In fact she must understand that I have no claim and feel herself free to refuse."

"You are generous," Mrs. Osborn remarked. "Of course it is obvious that her gratitude must count for much."

"I don't want her gratitude to count," Kit declared, and Osborn gave him a puzzled glance.

"There is something else that must be said. Grace has been indulged and knows nothing of self-denial. Frugality that you think proper and usual would be hardship to her. Can you give your wife the comforts and refinements she has had at home?"

Kit noted Mrs. Osborn's faint smile and wondered whether it hinted at ironical amusement, but he put a document on the table.

"You are entitled to ask and I have brought a short draft of the arrangements I am ready to make."

Osborn picked up the paper and gave it to his wife. Then he looked at Kit with surprise.

"This alters things; you are almost a rich man! If you wanted, you could buy a house like Tarnside."

"No," said Kit firmly; "it alters nothing and leaves me where I was. I'm satisfied with Ashness."

"Ah," said Osborn. "You mean you would sooner be a working farmer than a country gentleman? The preference is somewhat remarkable!"

"I know where I belong. The important thing is that if Miss Osborn marries me, she will be a farmer's wife."

"Exactly," said Osborn. "From my point of view, it's an awkward drawback. I doubt if my daughter is suited for the part." He looked at Mrs. Osborn and resumed: "But this is a matter Grace must decide about and you insisted that no pressure should be used. I imagine you were afraid of my influence and do not know if I am afraid of yours or not. If you agree, I will send for her."

Kit said he was willing and was silent when Osborn went away. Although he imagined Mrs. Osborn was

sympathetic, he could not force himself to talk. Since he had insisted that persuasion must not be used, he could not demand to meet Grace alone and she might find it hard to accept his plans without some explanation, which would be awkward to give when her parents were there. He could, if he wanted, change his mode of life, but if they were to be happy, she must be removed from influences he thought dangerous and he must use his energy in useful work. He saw this very clearly; but whether Grace would see it was another thing.

He felt some strain while he waited and watched the trembling shadows move upon the grass. The rays of light that pierced the dark foliage flickered about Mrs. Osborn's dress and when he glanced at her he thought her look encouraging, but she did not speak. By and by Osborn returned and said Grace was coming, and Kit found the suspense hard to bear.

At length she came and his heart beat as he watched her cross the lawn. She wore a plain white dress and when she stopped in front of the others her face was pale but calm.

"Mr. Askew has asked my permission to marry you and I cannot refuse if you agree," Osborn said in a formal tone. "He stipulates that I must not persuade you one way or the other, and declares that he does not want to work upon your gratitude."

Some colour came into Grace's face as she looked at Kit. "Then, you don't value my gratitude?"

"I value it very much," Kit replied with forced quietness. "But I feel it ought not to count."

He stopped awkwardly, for he noted a sparkle in Grace's eyes and felt that he was badly handicapped. She was proud and probably did not understand his disinterested attitude. It was a relief when Mrs. Osborn interposed:

"Mr. Askew is trying to be just. We have agreed that you are not to be influenced."

"Ah," said Grace, "I think I see——"

She waited and Osborn went on: "Since you are to make a free choice, I must state things as plainly as I can. Mr. Askew is not poor; he is able to give you all we think you

ought to have. In fact, there is no very obvious reason he should not leave Ashness, but he does not mean to do so, and although I cannot follow his argument, imagines that it would be better for you both if he carries on his farming. It looks as if he did not approve our rule."

Kit frowned, and coloured when Grace turned to him. On the whole, Osborn had not stated things incorrectly, but the situation was embarrassing; Grace would, no doubt, resent the stipulation he felt forced to make and expect a more lover-like attitude from the man who asked her to be his wife.

"Grace," he said appealingly, "I'm afraid you don't understand. But when you must give up so much I durst not hide the drawbacks. Besides, it's agreed that I must not urge you."

She studied him for a moment. "I do understand," she said, and then turned to Osborn. "I suppose you are trying to guard me, but I am not afraid. One gets tired of pretence and secret economy, and forced idleness has not much charm. Well, if Mr. Askew, knowing what he knows about us, is willing to run the risk——"

"Grace!" said Kit, moving forward, but she stopped him with a proud gesture.

"There is a risk. I think we shall both need courage, but if you are willing I need not hesitate. I will try to make a good farmer's wife."

She turned and went away, and the blood came into Kit's face as he looked at Osborn.

"I have played fair, but it was hard. Now you have heard her answer, I'm at liberty to plead my cause."

Osborn said nothing, but his wife gave Kit a friendly smile and he went off with a resolute step in pursuit of Grace. He came up with her in a shrubbery, but it looked as if she did not hear him, for her head was bent.

"Grace," he said, putting his hand on her arm, "I'm embarrassed and, in a way, ashamed."

She turned and confronted him with her wonted calm. "I don't see why you are ashamed. You were just—I think I mean quite impartial. You wanted me to weigh

things and would have been resigned if I had found the drawbacks too much."

"It wasn't as easy as you think," Kit said grimly. "In fact, I was burning with anger and suspense. But, you see, I had promised your father——"

"Yes," said Grace; "that was plain. You were firm when you thought I might be forced to marry Thorn, and when father agreed not to use his influence, I suppose you could not use yours. Well, I'm glad you were angry; it was human, and your scrupulous fairness was not flattering." She paused and, to Kit's relief, gave him a smile. "After all, it would not have hurt to be urged to marry the man I did like."

"You mean me?" said Kit and boldly took her in his arms.

She drew back from him, blushing, after a few moments, but Kit was content. There was something fascinatingly elusive about Grace and he could wait. They went on quietly down the path until they came to a bench in a shady nook. Kit leaned against a tree and Grace sat down.

"Kit," she said, "I didn't know you were rich. It really doesn't matter, but I'm glad I fell in love with you when I didn't know."

"Then, you were in love with me?"

She smiled. "Of course! I must have been, when I came to you because I was afraid of Thorn. Love gave me confidence; I knew you would help. In a way, I did an extravagant thing, because you were not really like a lover at all."

"The control I used often hurt," said Kit. "I was afraid I might alarm and lose you; it was much to see you now and then." He paused, feeling there was something to be said that must be said now. "However, about Ashness——"

"Oh," said Grace, "I suppose it cost you an effort to be firm and I hope it did. You needn't be afraid, though. When my father told me, I understood, and it won't hurt to leave Tarnside; I'm anxious to get away."

"My dear!" said Kit. "Ashness has some charm and we will try to make it a proper home for you."

"It is a home; I sometimes went to see your father—I liked him so much, Kit. One feels the old house has sheltered sincere men and women who loved each other and something they left haunts the quiet spot. I don't want you to alter it much."

"You shall alter it as you like. The only rule at Ashness will be what pleases you."

"Now you're very nice! I'm going to be happy because I can be myself. So far, I've been forced to be reserved. You don't really know me, Kit."

"Perhaps that's true," Kit remarked. "You're wonderful, because there's always some fresh charm to learn. I thought I knew you before I went away, but when I came back I saw how foolish I was. I wonder whether you knew I loved you then?"

Grace blushed. "I think, I knew, and felt cheated."

"Why did you feel cheated?"

"Oh," said Grace, "I liked you! I was young and felt I was entitled to love a man who loved me, if I wanted, but couldn't use my right. Then, not long since, when you were so grave and just, I felt I had been cheated worse."

"I see," said Kit and came nearer the bench. "I was cheated, too. But look at me, dear, and I'll try to tell you all I think."

He told her with fire and passion and when he stopped, bending down to her, she put her arm round his neck.

"Now you're ridiculously romantic, but you're very charming, Kit," she said.

CHAPTER XI

OSBORN'S SURRENDER

BY degrees Osborn accepted his daughter's choice philosophically. Kit was not the son-in-law he had wanted, but he was forced to admit that the fellow jarred less than he had thought. For one thing, he never reminded

Osborn of the benefit he had conferred, and the latter noted that his country-house neighbours opened their doors to him. They could not, of course, altogether ignore the man Grace had promised to marry, but Osborn soon had grounds for imagining that they liked Kit for himself. The wedding had been fixed and Osborn, although not satisfied, was resigned.

It began to look as if the gloom that had long ruled at Tarnside was banished. Mrs. Osborn's reserve was less marked, she smiled, and her step was lighter. Grace, too, had changed and developed. She had often been impatient, but now was marked by a happy calm. Osborn found her gentler and sometimes strangely compliant, although he felt he must make no rash demands. The girl indulged him, but she could be firm. Her new serenity had a charm. Moreover, Gerald wrote cheerful letters and declared that he was makingbetter progress than would have been possible for him at home.

Osborn had seldom thought much about the happiness of his family, but he felt a dull satisfaction because things were going well with the others. It was a set-off against his troubles, which were getting worse. The improvements his tenants and Hayes had forced him to make cost more than he calculated and he met stubborn resistance when he talked about putting up the rents. The money he had got by the last mortgage had gone ; he could not borrow more, and his creditors demanded payment of his debts. He put off the reckoning, however, until, one day when he drove to the market town to consult his agent, he got a rude jar.

In the first place, Hayes kept him waiting in a cold room, and he stood for a time by the window, looking out drearily at the old-fashioned square. The day was bleak and wet, and the high moors that shut in the little town loomed, blurred and forbidding, through drifting mist. The square was empty, the fronts of the tall old houses were dark with rain, and the drops from a clump of bare trees fell in a steady shower on the grass behind the iron rails. The gloom reacted upon Osborn's disturbed mood, and he frowned when Hayes came in.

"I sent you word that I would call," he said.

"You did," Hayes agreed. "I was occupied when my clerk told me you were here."

Osborn looked at him with some surprise. Hayes was very cool and not apologetic. "Well," he said, "you know what I want to talk about. I suppose you have seen Forsyth and Langdon about the renewal of their leases?"

"Yes. Both state they'll go sooner than pay you extra rent."

"Then they must go," Osborn rejoined, trying to hide his disappointment, since he had spent some money on the steadings in the hope of raising the rent. Now he came to think of it, Hayes had held this out as an inducement when he urged the expenditure. "It looks as if your judgment wasn't very good, but by comparison with other things the matter's not important," he resumed. "You know the sum I'll need between now and the end of the term?"

"I do know. In fact, I imagine you will need more than you suspect," Hayes rejoined. "You'll find it impossible to borrow the money on satisfactory terms."

Osborn looked hard at him. The fellow's manner was rather abrupt than sympathetic; but Hayes went on: "Before we advertise for new tenants, there is something I want to suggest. Although the farms are mortgaged, I might be able to find a buyer—at a price."

"No," said Osborn firmly. "The buyer would have to undertake the debt and the sum he would be willing to pay would not last me long. When it was spent I'd have practically nothing left."

"The situation's awkward; but there it is! Of course if you were able to carry on until your rents come in——"

"You know I can't carry on. I came to you, hoping you might suggest a workable plan. Who is the buyer?"

"I am," said Hayes.

Osborn's face got red and he struggled for self-control. The fellow was his servant, but it looked as if he had cunningly involved him in entanglements an honest agent would have avoided. Osborn remembered that he had sometimes vaguely suspected Hayes. Now he knew him, it was too late.

"I may be forced to sell, but not to you," he said haughtily.

Hayes shrugged. "That must be as you like, but I'm able to give you a better price than anybody else. I have an object for buying the farms and, if necessary, would pay something near their proper value, without taking off much for the debt. Anyhow, you had better look at this statement of your liabilities,"

Osborn studied the document with a hopeless feeling. Things were worse than he had feared and it cost him an effort to pull himself together when he looked up.

"Why do you want to buy?" he asked.

"Well, you see, the land between Forsyth's and the dalehead is heavily mortgaged, and, taking the two farms with the others, would make a compact block that could be economically worked. The new estate would run down to Tarnside, and since you may find it needful to sell the house, I might make you an offer."

"But the consolidation wouldn't help *you*," Osborn remarked with a puzzled look. "It would, perhaps, be an advantage for the mortgage holders."

"I hold the mortgages," Hayes said quietly.

Osborn started. "But," he stammered, "I got the money from somebody else."

"That is so. I bought the other debts, and supplied the funds when you raised new loans."

"You bought the debts with my money!" Osborn exclaimed. "You used your post to rob me of my estate!"

"I suppose one must make allowances, but you are unjust. You got the proper value for the land you pawned, and squandered the money. The consequence was inevitable and it's futile to complain. For that matter, it is not altogether unusual for a landlord and his steward to change places."

"I trusted you and you cheated me," Osborn resumed with poignant bitterness.

"You lived in false security and refused to think. You knew the reckoning must come, but were satisfied if you could put it off. Now you must bear the consequences;

it is not my fault. However, this is not important. Will you sell?"

"No," said Osborn hoarsely. "I will not sell to *you*."

Hayes smiled. "You must sell to somebody and will not get as good a price."

Osborn got up and went out with a dragging step. The blow had left him numb, but as he drove home in the rain he had a hazy notion that Hayes' statements were to some extent justified. He had lived in false security; seeing how things were going and yet refusing to believe. Somehow, it had looked impossible for him to lose Tarnside. The estate was his by the sacred right of inheritance; for a hundred years there had been an Osborn at the Hall. Yet the estate had gone, and he was to blame. He felt old and broken when he told his wife and daughter about the interview.

Mrs. Osborn did not look as much surprised as he had thought and Grace, although sympathetic, was calm. They had known the blow was coming and were ready for the shock. After a time, Osborn left them and Grace looked at her mother.

"I must tell Kit."

"Yes," said Mrs. Osborn. "I think he ought to know, though this is not a matter in which he can help."

"It looks like that," Grace agreed and then paused with a confident smile. "But Kit's rather wonderful; you don't really know him yet. He always finds a way when there is something hard to be done."

"Ah," said Mrs. Osborn, "there is comfort in our troubles since they have given you a man you can trust."

Grace went to Ashness and found Kit studying some accounts in the room she called his museum.

"Put the books away, come to the fire and talk to me," said Grace, and stopped him when he moved a chair. "I think I'll take the low stool. It's wretchedly cold and I really came to be comforted."

She sat down, leaning against his chair, with his head turned so that she could look up, and held her hands to the fire. Kit's heart beat, for Grace had developed recently;

her reserve had gone and a curious, frank tenderness had come instead.

"This is very nice," she resumed. "There's something very homelike about Ashness. Perhaps I'm romantic, but I sometimes feel as if your father was still at the old house. It's kind and quiet—like him. Don't you think people can leave an influence, Kit?"

"Yours will last. So far, I haven't had much quietness."

"I'm afraid I've come to bother you again. I hate to bother you, but somehow trouble seems to follow me."

"Your troubles are mine," Kit said and stroked her head. "Tell me about it."

Grace told him, and although he said nothing, waited calmly. His face was thoughtful but the silence was not awkward; she felt that it was marked by an intimate confidence.

"Kit," she resumed at length, "I don't know if you can help, or if you ought. You must decide, dear. I just wanted to tell you, and I'm comforted."

"I can help," Kit answered quietly. "People abroad have paid some debts I didn't expect to get and I'm richer than I thought." He paused and mused for a moment or two. "It's strange the thing should happen now. When I came home I imagined Ashness would occupy all my time, but I soon began to feel I hadn't scope enough. You see, I'd been with Adam and he was a hustler. Well, it looks as if I had found a new field."

"You mean you might buy Tarnside?"

"Yes. I think the estate might be made to pay. High farming's a risky business in our climate and we have been satisfied to spend little and get a small return. I think there's a better plan than that; if one uses modern methods and can invest the capital. However I see an obstacle to my buying Tarnside."

"Father?" Grace suggested. "Well, I'm afraid he would never be economical and he likes to rule. But I didn't mean, Kit, that you should give him money to squander."

"I know," Kit said gently, although his face was rather stern. "Adam's legacy must not be wasted in extrava-

gance. Then, you see, Tarnside ought to have been Gerald's; but he's ruled out——"

Grace looked up. "Yes, Kit. Now you have given him a fresh start, he may make a useful man, but Tarnside is not for him." She paused and blushed, but her glance was steady as she went on: "It must be ours, if you buy it, for us to hold in trust——"

She turned her head and Kit quietly touched her hair. They were silent for a few moments and then he said, "If the estate is to be properly managed, my part will need much tact and I'm impatient now and then. But we would live at Ashness and your mother would understand my dfficulties."

"She would help. Father's old, Kit, and might be indulged. You would try not to hurt him, and could consult him about things that didn't matter. I think he'd be satisfied if you let him imagine he had some control."

Kit smiled. "Very well; we will make the plunge. Tell your father to do nothing until Hayes moves. The fellow's cunning and it might be better if he didn't know what we mean to do."

He bent down and kissed her and she pressed her face against his hand. "Kit, you're wonderful. Things get done when you come on the scene, but perhaps you're nicest when they're done for me. After all, I am an Osborn and would have hated to let Tarnside go; let's plan what we can do when it belongs to us."

For a time they engaged in happy talk, but Kit re-opened his account books when Grace went home. It looked as if he were about to make a rash plunge, because he would not have much money left when he had carried out his plans. However, he could guard against the worst risks and on the whole imagined the venture ought to pay.

Some weeks later, Osborn sent for him, and on reaching Tarnside he was shown into the library. Mrs. Osborn was with her husband and there was a bundle of papers on the big table.

"I have got the particulars you wanted," Osborn said. "Hayes will arrive in half an hour, but that should give us time enough."

Kit nodded. "Yes, I want a few minutes."

When he had studied the documents he looked up. Tarnside would soon be his and he glanced about the library with a new curiosity. Although the day was dark and rain beat upon the high windows, the light was strong enough to show the fine modelling of the old and shabby furniture. It was a noble room and with well-used money could be given a touch of stateliness; but there was something cold and austere about Tarnside, while Ashness was homelike and warm. His short survey strengthened Kit's half-conscious feeling that he belonged to the farm and not the Hall.

"Two things are obvious," he remarked. "The mortgages must be wiped off; and when other debts have been paid the rents of the land I'm willing to redeem ought to keep you going, if they're economically used."

"I doubt it," Osborn rejoined. "So far, the rents of the whole estate have failed to do so."

"They will do so now," Kit said rather dryly. "That is, if I'm to free the land. But you must decide if you will help or not."

He looked at Mrs. Osborn, who made a sign of agreement. "There will be enough, Kit. Indeed, in some ways, we shall be better off than we were."

"You have pluck," said Kit, and turned to Osborn, knowing he must be firm. "The house and the grounds will be yours to use as you like and the farmers will bring their complaints and requests first to you. You will be the acknowledged landlord and I shall be glad of your advice; but the expenditure will be controlled by me."

Osborn did not reply, but Mrs. Osborn said, "It is a generous offer."

Kit waited, conscious of some suspense, for he doubted if Osborn's pride was quite humbled yet. He did not want to humble him, but, for the sake of Grace and her mother, did not mean to let him wreck his plans. After a few moments Osborn looked up.

"It is a hard choice, but you have taken the proper line and I'm resigned," he said. "After all, I have had my day, and although luck has been against me, cannot claim that

I have used it well. Besides, I'm not robbing Gerald by agreeing to your plan ; Gerald robbed himself and me." He paused and went on with some emotion : " Very well, I'm ready to abdicate, and thank you for trying to save my feelings by giving me nominal control."

There was nothing more of much importance to be said, and with the object of banishing the strain, Kit began about improving some of the farms. Osborn did not help him much, but he kept it up until Hayes arrived. The latter seemed surprised to see Kit and hesitated when Osborn indicated a chair.

" Mrs. Osborn will stop, and I brought Mr. Askew to meet you."

" As you like," said Hayes, who looked annoyed, but sat down and took out some documents. " You have had formal notice that repayment of these loans is due, and it would be an advantage to make arrangements for taking up the other mortgages that will soon run out. Some time since, I made you an offer that you refused."

" That is so," Osborn agreed. Your offer is still unacceptable. What are you going to do ? "

" I must advertise the mortgaged farms for public sale, and when arrears of interest, various charges, and smaller loans are deducted, there will probably be nothing left. The rest is not my business, but I have managed the estate and do not see how you can carry on."

" It is not your business, and Mr. Askew has a plan."

Hayes smiled as he turned to Kit. " You may perhaps resent my advice, but I think it's sound ; you would be rash to meddle. A small sum would be swallowed up and make no difference. You would be poorer and Mr. Osborn would not gain."

" That's obvious, if the sum were small," Kit agreed. " But how much do you expect to get if you sell the farms ? "

He nodded when Hayes told him. " A fair estimate ! I think we can take it as the proper price. You mean to buy the farms in, but I want them too, and if you force a sale, I'll bid higher."

"Can you bid against me?" Hayes asked with some thing of a sneer.

"I'll answer that afterwards. In the meantime, let state that I want the other farms when the mortgages out. You can fight me, if you like, but I don't think it pay you, and if we run prices up Mr. Osborn will gain. well, here's my offer to buy up all his debts."

He gave a document to Hayes, who studied it surprise. "I presume you're serious?" the latter with an effort. "You are rasher than I thought if you make this offer good."

"I can certainly make it good. You had better ap to the bank manager if you have doubts."

For a few moments Hayes studied Kit, who looked quietly resolute. Then he said, "You are determined to oppose me if I don't consent?"

"Yes," said Kit. "I mean to buy all the land Mr Osborn has pawned. If you want it, you'll have to pay the price I fix, since it must be a public sale. Don't you think it would be prudent to accept my offer?"

Hayes clenched his fist, but with an effort preserved his self-control. "I am forced to agree."

"Very well. Take the documents to my lawyers and as soon as they are satisfied I'll give you a cheque."

Hayes nodded silently, and bowing to Mrs. Osborn went out. When he had gone, Osborn got up.

"We have not been good friends, Kit," he said with some emotion. "Old prejudices are hard to conquer, but mine have broken down at last—you have beaten me. Well, I suppose I would not admit that the code I clung to had gone for good, but now I'm dropping out, I don't know that I could find a better man to step into my place." He paused and gave Kit his hand. "After all, Tarnside is not lost to us. Grace will follow me—she belongs to the new school, but I think your children will rule the old house well."

Then Mrs. Osborn advanced and kissed Kit, who went out with her and found Grace waiting in the hall.

"Hayes has gone," Mrs. Osborn remarked. "Kit has forced him to agree, and your father is reconciled. We have had much trouble, but I think we shall all be happy yet."

Grace looked up and her eyes shone. "Ah," she said, "I w long since that Kit was wonderful! In one way, it dn't have mattered if he had saved Tarnside or not; now you and father know what a dear he is!"

THE END.

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